

THERE'S NO ESCAPE



Ian Serraillier

THE NEW WINDMILL SERIES

General Editors: Anne and Ian Serraillier

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THERE'S NO ESCAPE

An Adventure Story

by

IAN SERRAILLIER

Illustrated by
C. WALTER HODGES



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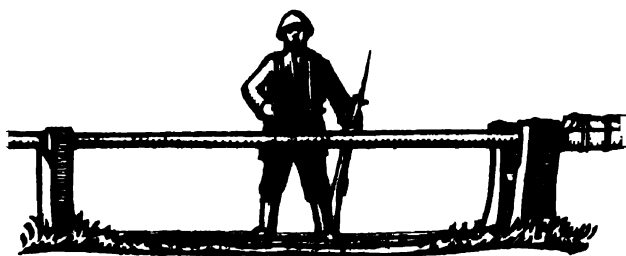
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To
FRANCIS HOLTON

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CHAPTER I

THE SECRET MESSAGE

WHEN I got back to my flat that night I was very tired. But there was something lying on the doormat that woke me up very thoroughly indeed — a telegram:

URGENT CONFIDENTIAL STOP CAN YOU COME AND SEE
ME TOMORROW MORNING 10.15 STOP MACLAREN

I could hardly wait for the morning, I was so excited. It was six months since I had called on Maclaren, Chief Secretary of the Bureau of Investigation, with my proposal concerning Dr. Helpmann's Radar-beam camera. Six whole months! I thought he must have failed to trace Helpmann, and that he had dropped my idea. Meanwhile the war had been dragging on its grim course.

It rained all next morning and a great cloudburst emptied itself upon me as I splashed my way along the

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street, past battered buildings and bomb craters half full of water, to the Bureau of Investigation. Yes, the building was still there. But it had been hit since my visit, for one wall was buttressed with timber supports.

"Been washed up with the tide, sir?" said the porter, as he helped me off with my sodden mackintosh. "Looks as if we'll need to swim home tonight."

He handed me over to the reception clerk, who checked my papers and identity card, maddeningly slowly.

"I know my way up to Mr. Maclaren's office. Number 37, top floor," I said.

"No, Mr. Howarth," said the clerk. "He's in the basement now. We had a direct hit a month ago, and half the offices are out of action."

I was taken along the passage and down a dingy stairway to the cellars. They had been converted into offices and one of them was Maclaren's.

My guide knocked on the door.

"Come in!" said a high-pitched voice.

And I was in the office at last. It was lit by fluorescent tubes and Maclaren was sitting at a massive glass-top desk, strewn with files and papers. I recognized one of the files, for I had brought it on my previous visit. It was volume 34 of the proceedings of the Cambridge Discursive Society containing Dr. Helpmann's lecture: "A Discourse on a new Principle for focusing Radar-waves for the Radio-photography of Weather Conditions along an Air-Route." The lecture was not as stodgy as it sounds. I had heard the doctor deliver it in my student days.

"Sit down, Howarth," said Maclaren, without looking up from what he was writing.

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He was a tall man, gaunt and squarely built, with a grey moustache and thin hair grey at the temples. In front of him was a cup of black coffee which appeared to be quite cold, and a long thin cigar was smouldering away on an ashtray.

"Well, sir, have you traced Helpmann?" I asked eagerly.

He did not reply at once, but went on writing for several moments. Then he laid down his pen, looked at me and sighed. How tired his eyes were! He might have been at his desk all night.

"I can inform you of his whereabouts three weeks ago." He spoke pompously, but with no trace of a Scots accent. "University of Mavonec. Research Professor."

He got up and, walking over to the map of Europe hanging on the wall, pointed to the small university town just outside the borders of Silvania. It was a depressing sight, that map. Red shading showed that most of Europe had already been overrun by the enemy—the Yugo-Latians, or "Yugs" as we called them. For months they had been greedily pushing their conquests further and further. In Central Europe only neutral Tellyria was still free.

"My agents have been searching for him for six months," he continued. "It's been an appallingly difficult job. If we could have contacted him two months ago before the enemy occupied the country, it would have been easy to get him away. But now they're over the frontier and into Silvania—" He shrugged his shoulders and gave me a weary smile. "What's happened to him is anybody's guess."

"They'd surely leave him alone. He's a scientist and

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quite disinterested. I expect he's still at the university."

"The university is closed. The enemy are using it as a barracks. My agent reports that he's known to have left the town."

"What about the doctor's work? Does he say anything about the Radar-beam camera?"

"Nothing at all."

My hopes sank. I began to wonder why Maclaren had bothered to send for me at all. With half the width of Europe between me and Mavonec, what could *I* do to help trace the doctor? I was about to say something of the sort when Maclaren opened a drawer in the desk, took out an envelope and handed it to me.

"What do you make of this?" he said.

The envelope was addressed to a Mrs. Robinson in a northern suburb of the city and carried a Spanish stamp. I took out the letter — it came from Mavonec — and read it:

Dear Judy,

It is so long since we had our holiday together before the war and I often think of the times we spent. My children are fast growing up and my husband continues with his work on the railway . . .

It went on in this strain, with nothing but family news and a lot of twaddle about clothes and how hard it was to buy good quality stuff, and was signed "Margrit".

I was in no mood to have my leg pulled, so I answered Maclaren's question plainly. "It's drivel," I said, "and if that's all you have to show me, I won't stay to waste any more of your precious time." I got up to go.

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Maclaren laughed out loud. "Drivel, is it? That letter contains enough secret information to keep us busy for weeks, as well as telling me all we know about Helpmann."

"Oh, a code, is it?" I said, and sat down again.

"No, not a code. I'll show you, if you like. But I must swear you to secrecy. Even in this building, where we unravel so many secrets, this one is known to only a few."

He fetched a microscope from the cupboard and put it on the table. Spreading the letter out flat, he took a miniature surgical scalpel from his wallet and with the point of the blade prised open the the full stop after the word 'spent'. To my amazement it fell back like a tiny hinged lid, leaving the fibre of the paper quite bare underneath it. Or rather I *thought* it was bare, until he slid this part of the paper under the microscope objective, focused carefully and told me to look. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was a complete typewritten message of thirty or forty words, giving the information about Helpmann which Maclaren had already disclosed to me.

"The message is photographed on to the paper, reduced to the size of a midge," Maclaren explained. "The microscope magnifies it two hundred times. Micro-dot, we call it, an invention of our espionage service. Beats all your micro-films rolled round cotton-reels, your safety matches writing in invisible ink, and what not. Each full stop in this charming chat to Judy carries a message."

"About Helpmann?"

"There's only one other about Helpmann. It's because of this message that I sent for you. I think *you* can help here, Howarth."

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The full stop containing the message was already bared, for, as he explained to me, it had come right away when he originally prised it open. In some excitement I peered down the microscope eyepiece again. This is what I read:

Checked Helpmann's lodgings. Landlady ignorant whereabouts; says he took brown suitcase on west-going tram. Examined room. Found only burnt papers including half-destroyed pencilled note from telephone pad saying "M.J.K. → 16k lab." Cannot unravel meaning.

I leaned back in my chair. "Well, can you unravel it?" I asked.

"No, but perhaps you can, Howarth." He removed the letter, folded it carefully in the envelope, and returned it to the desk drawer. "I've had the message copied for you. Here it is. Would you be so good as to take it home with you and —"

"But it's double-dutch to me," I broke in. "I was trained as a scientist, not as a secret agent. God knows I've been a good many things in my time, and I've knocked about the world plenty. But I'm no secret agent. What about the man on the job, your agent in Mavonec? Can't he follow it up?"

"I'm afraid not," said Maclaren, and from the grave note in his voice I knew there was some unpleasant information coming. "He's dead, poor fellow. The enemy secret police caught him. He tried to escape and they shot him. I got the news yesterday." He was silent for a moment before he went on. "If my theory is right, the letters on Helpmann's telephone pad are a clue to where

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he has gone. He burnt his papers before he left. He must have left in a hurry, before he could see that the job was properly done. His landlady says he went westwards. That's towards Silvania, and it's only forty miles to the frontier. The enemy had not yet reached the frontier, so it's probable he was going there. Now then, Howarth —" He planted his elbows on the desk, and, resting his chin on his clasped hands, stared straight at me. "You know Silvania well. You've lived and worked there. You speak the language like a native. For four years you worked at the experimental weather laboratory in the Silvanian Alps. Besides this, you know Helpmann and realize the importance of our getting him over here. You're tough and you're still a young man. I'm asking you straight out — will you go and find him and bring him back?"

The request quite took my breath away. I had not expected this, and my immediate reaction was to refuse. But before I had time to say anything, Maclaren went on:

"My request isn't as unreasonable as it sounds. I know you are a busy man, Howarth. Your work as a meteorologist is invaluable to the country. But think what Helpmann's assistance would mean, what a revolution the Radar-beam camera together with —"

"The theory is familiar enough to us, and the camera is standard equipment," I put in.

"But is it familiar to the enemy as well? That's the point," said Maclaren, tapping the desk with his knuckle. "It would not be difficult for them to worm the secret out of Helpmann. I understand he is a man of no politics and owes allegiance to nobody. And with the secret of the camera goes the secret of the Blocking Beam. As you

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pointed out to me some months ago, by employing the Blocking Beam they could make our use of the camera quite ineffective. It is supremely important to us to get hold of Helpmann."

"How do you propose to get me there? Silvania has no seaboard. The enemy guard the southern and eastern approaches, and to north and west are the Alps."

"We shall drop you out of the clouds."

"You mean a parachute jump?"

"Exactly."

"But — "

"You're going to tell me you haven't jumped since you were in the Royal Air Force."

"That was a long time ago."

"A little practice ought to put you right. It's not all that hard. Hang it, man, I've jumped myself, quite untrained, in circumstances that are too uncomfortable to recall. I had to bale out. Landed in a bog and had to be scooped out." He shuddered at the recollection. "But you, with your previous experience, will no doubt do better."

"And what about my work in the Met. Office? I'm under contract to — "

"I have seen to that already. The Government Department have agreed to release you for four months. I have arranged a short training course for you. You will be sent to a jump school for some practice, then to a security school to learn the art of being a gangster — how to lie successfully, how to cover up your traces, to disguise yourself, and so on. You are an intelligent man and these things need not take you more than a week or two to learn. After that you will be dropped into Silvania and

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later at an arranged date you will be collected by plane — at a secret landing ground — *with* Dr. Helpmann."

"In fact, it's all going to be as easy as walking upstairs to bed," I said sarcastically. "Marvellous efficiency! But there's one thing you've forgotten, Maclaren."

"And what's that?"

"To obtain *my* consent." I spoke with a touch of temper in my voice. I'm not afraid of danger. But if there's one thing I can't stand it is being used as a pawn in someone else's game, especially when it's a game for which I consider myself ill-suited. Yet here was Maclaren beaming at me in his safe and comfortable office, having calmly fixed up over the telephone for me to risk my life on a dangerous enterprise, with the flimsiest of clues to go on and the slenderest chances of success. And all this without any reference to me.

I did not need to say any more, for I could see he understood my attitude. He became at once conciliatory, even apologetic, explaining to me the pressure under which he and his staff worked, and in view of the lengthy time it had taken to trace Helpmann the extreme urgency of getting hold of him with the least delay. He said that he had found out all about me and had the greatest confidence in my fitness for the mission. Even so, I was to be under no obligation to accept. His only stipulation was that I should give him my decision within forty-eight hours. Would I in the meantime consider the micro-dot message very carefully and see if I could find a meaning in it? Finally, he said he fully appreciated the risks I should be undergoing. He told me what they were and promised to do everything he could to lessen them. On no account would he fail to send a plane to pick up the

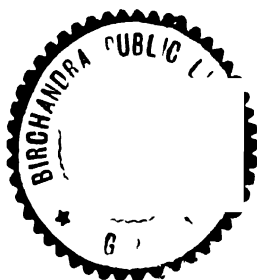
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two of us. That was the most important part of the mission.

"What happens if we fail to contact the plane?" I asked.

Maclaren smiled grimly.

"If that happens, you're trapped. There's no escape."



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And yet — we needed Helpmann desperately.

I turned to the books I had picked up on the way home from the library of the Physical Society. The Radar-beam camera, I remembered, was based on Helpmann's original observation of the focusing effect of very moist air upon a complex radar signal. He had spent his time from that moment in working out the mathematical theory involved. When it was suggested to him that this had a possible application to weather-forecasting, he was but faintly interested. The Met. and Radar scientists used him only as a consultant in the research programme that had evolved the camera. He had indicated the rough lines for them to work on, and six months later they had come back to him for further instructions. Thus it was that when the war began the Radar-beam weather camera was standard equipment in the Royal Air Force. It enabled the air-crew to spot the position of air-mass boundaries or "fronts", from a distance of up to two hundred miles. In this way the bad weather, which everyone knows is associated with these "fronts", could be traced from a distance. Routes could be changed well in advance and clear-weather targets chosen — all this from the plane itself.

When the camera was well established, the possibility arose that an attacking bomber force might equally well use it in raids on England. Again the Air Ministry approached Helpmann, and this time his imagination was really fired. Working at a furious pace, he evolved the physical system of rays that could upset the focusing effect. This brilliant result became the Blocking Beam.

Yes, it was all clear to me. The secret of the Blocking Beam was in Helpmann's brain. Helpmann was in

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Silvania. The enemy was in Silvania. We *had* to get Helpmann out!

I now gave my attention to the message the agent had copied from the telephone pad. Propping it up against a jug of coffee, I stared at it hopefully. "Lab" was obviously laboratory. The arrow probably indicated direction. Helpmann was going to some laboratory, the only clue to which lay in the remaining letters and figures: M.J.K. 16k. This was the puzzling part. Why a capital K and then a small one? Were M.J.K. the initials of some friend who was to help him, or perhaps the surnames of several friends? How was I to know? And suppose Maclaren was wrong in thinking the message had been scribbled by the phone in haste at the last moment? There was no evidence to show that it did not relate to some trivial engagement or professional call of Helpmann's long before the enemy reached Mavonec. The possibilities were endless. It wasn't long before I screwed the paper up, threw it into the wastepaper basket and gave my full attention to the coffee.

I was reading the newspaper next morning when suddenly a fresh and more hopeful approach to the problem occurred to me. The headlines were all about the progress of the enemy invasion of Silvania — "Enemy reach outskirts of Javor." "Two more divisions reported at frontier." The frontier town referred to in the text was Medrava. Javor was some 75 miles into Silvania. It was the initial letters of these towns — M and J — that sent me with renewed interest to my map. Mavonec . . . Medrava . . . Javor . . . Yes, they lay practically in a straight line. Did they indicate Helpmann's proposed line of escape?

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The next letter, K, was harder to locate, for every other town and village in Silvania begins with a K. I looked at the 16k for a clue — and in a flash I had it. Sixteen kilometres to K. Or was it *from* K, for the arrow came after the K? Again I examined the map, only to find that there were no places beginning with K exactly sixteen kilometres from Javor, but several small villages within a radius of eleven to fifteen kilometres. Two of these villages were familiar to me, untidy hamlets with a handful of farms and a few hundred peasants — for they lay on the direct route to the Alps. But by no stretch of the imagination could I picture them as containing laboratories. Nevertheless, the idea was worth pondering. It was the most hopeful explanation that had yet occurred to me.

I'm afraid that some of my enthusiasm faded overnight, and in the morning the idea seemed to me rather commonplace. However, I kept my promise to Maclaren and returned to him in the afternoon to give him my decision. Of course I told him my interpretation of the message, inadequate though it was. He expressed himself delighted and said he was sure I was on the right lines and that one had only to be on the spot to discover the missing information. I wished I could have felt as confident. You see, I intended to refuse his offer. I had a satisfying job among good colleagues and I knew our work was important. I had been asked to go off into enemy-occupied country on a quest for which I considered myself completely unfitted. I couldn't help refusing.

And yet, when he put the question, my answer was, Yes. I don't know why I changed my mind. Perhaps it was because the war had made me restless. Perhaps I knew that if I refused I should never be quite at peace

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with myself again. I was answering a challenge to my courage.

The tension between us relaxed at once. Maclaren's pompous manner vanished, and he became quite human, smiling and shaking my hand most heartily. He talked freely and hopefully about Helpmann and the camera, and told me quite a dozen times he was convinced I would make a success of the business. Then he ordered tea to be brought in, and over two slabs of cake that tasted like cardboard and two scalding cups of office tea (it might have been coffee or dish-wash for all I could tell), he told me his plans for my training and the details of my mission. It took him nearly two hours, and he didn't once refer to any notes. I found myself respecting his ability and retentive memory and accepted him for the first time as a reliable colleague for the dangerous business we were going about.

Before I left, he wished me well and slapped me on the back. He meant it all in a friendly way, I know. But it isn't pleasant to be slapped on the back by a man who may be sending you to your death.

The next weeks were a nightmare to me. I didn't mind so much the security school. It was quite fun, though I am ashamed to say that I was quick in learning the ways of trickery and deceit that belong to a secret agent. It was the jump school that upset me. Months of meteorological research in a government laboratory hardly fit one for the tough life of a parachute-trainee. I found that method and equipment had changed enormously since my training days. I was thrown together with youngsters fresh from school, made to run

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like a hare, jump like a kangaroo, climb cliffs, break through barbed wire, and dash at breakneck speed across the "cat-walk" — a plank eight inches wide, ten feet above the ground. Next — partly by ground drill, partly on the parachute tower — I learnt how to drop, how to leave the aircraft, how to control the parachute in the air, how to hit the ground unhurt, and having landed how to spill the air out of the canopy by tugging on the supporting lines — a tricky business if there's any wind blowing. After a week I made my first jump — from a static balloon 700 feet up. Then came the real thing, a series of jumps from the plane. The other lads had to do six before they were passed out; but the officer took into account my previous experience and let me off with three. By the end of my course I was as tough as when I had rowed bow in my college eight.

I won't bore you with details of the other side of my training. It was very exacting. Every item of my equipment from my jumping kit down to the last button of my underclothes had to be carefully thought out. I was to pass for a Silvanian — a man of the highlands, not of the valleys — therefore I must look like one. It was no good having bakelite buttons stamped with the trademark of a home-town manufacturer. They must be made of metal and cloth-covered in the Silvanian style. Similarly my clothes must be of Silvanian cut; my hair must be cropped short (the barber cut it so that it bristled at the back like a two days' beard), and I must grow a moustache. The moustache was a tremendous success, and I was as pleased as a farmer with a bumper crop. It would have carried off first prize at any exhibition.

I had to familiarize myself from news-cuttings with the

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details of Silvanian life over the past three years, so that a slip in conversation would not give me away. I had to have money and a forged identity card. I had to have maps as well. But merely to carry these was not enough. I was made to look at them till the whole landscape within fifty miles of the dropping ground was as clear to me as a photograph. My instructors even built models of the country for me, with plasticine mountains, roads and villages.

What a strain it all was, what a frantic scramble! When at last the day of departure came and I was ordered to the aerodrome, it was a great relief. As the taxi took me to the airfield, I was feeling buoyant and exhilarated.

Had I known what dangers lay in store for me, what hairbreadth escapes, my mood would have been otherwise.



CHAPTER III

MOONDROP TO SILVANIA

FEW of my friends would have recognized me as I emerged from the equipment hut that August evening, a preposterous, bulging figure, all done up like a parcel, and staggered across the field to the runway where the plane was waiting. It was the parachute harness that made me feel like a parcel, for it seemed to be all straps and spring clips and made me move about more like a crab than a man. I was wearing a green-and-brown camouflaged parachute suit with fur collar, long trouser-legs and lots of zip-fasteners and pockets. Inside the pockets were a knife and compass, a torch with spare batteries, food for twenty-four hours, a service revolver, a small flask of rum, toilet-gear, maps and a pocket pad. Tucked into a leg pocket was a small light-weight spade, to help me to bury my parachute. Under all this I had a cotton shirt and the rough tweed trousers and jacket of a

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Silvanian highlander. Sewn into the lining was a list of vital information — figures, distances and so on, which I could not carry in my head; it was printed on rice paper, so that I could swallow it easily if captured. My head was covered with a close-fitting helmet with ear-flaps, and my ankles tightly bandaged to ease the strain of landing. I wore gauntlets on my hands, and on my feet mountain boots of stout leather with nailed soles. It would have been safer for me to wear regulation rubber-soled jumping boots, but this would have meant my carrying the leather boots and they proved to be too heavy.

The plane was a Barbarian twin-engined light bomber, with the emergency hatch converted for dropping parachutists. Under the hatch was a ladder, and my dispatcher, an N.C.O. in full flying kit, was waiting for me here. He was chewing gum with loud, sucking noises.

"Ello, mate," he said cheerfully. "Todd's my name. They call me Sweeney. You'll know why directly."

He told me to sit down and take it easy, then closed the hatch and signalled for the ladder to be removed.

"Eard of the demon barber, mate?"

"You bet," I said. "I was brought up on the blood-curdling tales of Sweeney Todd and the trapdoor under the barber's chair — and the innocent victims tumbled through — and the meat pies. Kept me awake at night."

"Well, there it is, mate. The trapdoor, I mean." He pointed to the hatch. "Now you know why they call me Sweeney. I drops 'em through there, 'undreds and 'undreds of 'em. And I never sees 'em no more. Breaks yer ruddy 'eart." He began to shed mock tears.

I took one look at the hatch, then sat as far away from it as I could. I wanted to forget about this diabolical

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contrivance for the next four hours. Forward, in the navigation compartment in the nose, I could hear the crew talking.

Suddenly the first engine shuddered into life, followed a moment later by the other, and we crept in unwieldy fashion round the perimeter-track to the end of the runway. Here the pilot tested the brakes and revved up each of the engines in turn, to make sure we had enough lift in them for the take-off. After a minute's waiting I caught the phrase "All clear for take-off!" above the dull roar of the idling engines, and we swung clumsily into position to straddle the white guide-line. The engines purred into a crescendo of noise, into a steady roar, and we were away, skimming along the runway.

I couldn't sit still, but fidgeted my way along to the port window and peered through. How fast the low buildings of the drome were dropping behind! In the gathering darkness I saw the boundary lights ahead of us. They were near now. It seemed we must crash into them. Then suddenly the vibration ceased, the lights slid smoothly away below us, we were airborne. We circled the field once, gaining height all the time, then nosed south and headed away into the darkness.

"Must I keep telling you?" said the dispatcher, who seemed bothered by my fidgeting. "There's four hours to go yet, and you'll need all your energy later." He thrust me down into the seat. "Try this, mate," he said, and gave me a packet of chewing-gum. I hate chewing-gum, but I put it in my mouth to please him and spat it out when he wasn't looking.

I did my best to rest, but I wasn't too successful. I kept checking over my equipment, noting all the items to

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make sure nothing had been forgotten, planning, going over and over in my mind what I must do when the time for jumping came.

After a while the interior lights were switched off. I could no longer see to check my stuff, and the throbbing, rhythmic drone of the engines sent me to sleep. It was just as well.

I woke to feel a rough hand shaking my shoulder, and opened my eyes into the beam of a flashlamp which dazzled me and made me blink.

"Show a leg, mate! Breakfast's cooking," said the voice of the dispatcher. He hustled me aft to eat the sandwiches that had been prepared and poured me out some coffee from a thermos.

I can't say that I felt much like eating. But God knows when and where I should get my next meal, so I did my best to force it all down. While I was eating, he told me it had been a quiet flight — a few searchlights as we crossed the coast and some light flak from coastal guns.

"You should 'ave seen the tracer, son," he said, in between chews of his gum. "All colours, like 'undreds of 'undreds and thousands on a kid's birthday cake. Coiled up out of the cloud, circled and fell slowly away."

By the light of the flashlamp I saw him lift his arm and arch it slowly over, to show me the curve of the flak.

"How much longer?" I asked. "When do we reach the mountains?"

"Christmastime," he answered.

I finished my sandwiches and sat down on the projection over the hatch. There was a perspex window in it, and through it I could see the top sides of the clouds,

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white and ghostly in the moonlight. It was cold in the plane; *how much colder it must be down there!* Then the clouds broke, and beyond the jagged, filmy edges I caught my first glimpse of the mountains with their white sparkling summits and sharp ridges and the deep darkness of the valleys between. Soon afterwards we banked steeply and on our port side I saw the moon, round and beautiful. We flew straight for a while and I lost her, till suddenly we banked again in the other direction, carelessly flinging her from port to starboard.

I turned round and saw the dispatcher checking the strongpoint. This is a bolt and shackle, fitted into the framework of the plane near the hatch. Soon he would be clipping on to it the static line of my parachute. I watched him a little anxiously, for my life depended on the strongpoint. It was this that was to take the tremendous strain of the snap of my parachute when I dropped, opening up the canopy above my head.

Then he spoke to me.

"It's a small 'ole, mate. When you jumps, keep yer 'ead back. Last bloke that jumped through 'ere forgot."

"Must have got a nasty crack," I said.

"Nasty crack? 'E left 'is bloomin' 'ead behind. I'm keeping it warm for 'im till after the war."

A few minutes later the navigation officer told him over the intercomm that we were approaching the dropping zone and that I was to get ready to drop. My throat went dry when he told me, and a cold wave shivered up my spine. While he tightened my straps (it was like being put into a straight-jacket) and inspected the safety-release box on my chest to make sure it wouldn't come undone, I thought of all the terrible things that might go wrong.

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The parachute might fail to open; the pilot might overshoot the mark and drop me on some bleak, untrodden snowfield. It was just as well I didn't know then what I was told months later — that my pilot was a novice; this was his first trip of the kind; the pilot who had been marked out for the trip had gone sick. Had I known this, I might have lost my nerve and refused to jump.

As he hooked my line on to the strongpoint, the dispatcher continued with his cheerful advice.

"Cross yer arms, mate, and keep yer 'ands on yer shoulders, and press down. Two trips back one of the lads forgot. 'Eld 'is arms above 'is ruddy 'ead. A sergeant too. Ought to 'ave known better."

"And what happened to him?"

"The slipstream blew 'is somethink arms off, poor blighter."

"But you leaned down and caught them in mid-air, then wrapped them up in a parcel and posted them on to him, eh?"

"Right as far as the parcel, mate. But I wasn't forking out the postage, not on *my* pay. Who d'yer fink I am, an Air-Marshal? No, mate. Took 'em to the Imperial War Museum. They're in the Gunnery Section now, 'Arms in Modern Warfare' — you know. There's a guide in civvies there to tell you all about 'em. Haw, haw, haw!"

Once again he checked the strongpoint and felt me all over.

The pilot slackened speed and I felt we were losing height. I knew he must drop below 120 miles an hour if I was to make a safe getaway.

The dispatcher was busy listening on the intercomm. I was pleased his attention was occupied, for I can't say I

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cared much for his conversation. The time dragged on desperately slowly.

Suddenly the message he was waiting for came. He leant up against me and shouted in my ear, "Don't jump till I tap you on the shoulder—like this. Just like Sweeney 'imself, what?" I nodded.

I wished he would undo the hatch and get it over quickly. But he was still listening on the intercomm. He must wait for the O.K. from the pilot.

Another message.

"Time to join the angels, mate. Crew wish you the very best of luck. Me too, but for Gawd's sake remember what I've told you."

I grinned at him. I don't think he saw, for his hand covered my mouth and shoved something in. More gum. I turned up both gloved thumbs. I was going to be all right. Then I shook his hand.

Next minute he had hinged back the emergency hatch. The bitter night wind burst in, and I seemed to have a window of ice pressing against my cheeks. In came the roar of the engines, ten times as loud.

There was a sickening lurch and my heart sank. I knew that lurch. It always came just before the drop. I wriggled right to the edge of the hatch. I closed my eyes. I didn't dare look down. Arms crossed, hands on shoulders, head back.

Then came the tap, a great hefty slap on the shoulder. The demon barber couldn't have done better. As I jumped I suddenly felt frightened no longer.

I remember the surge of the slip-stream as it struck me and cut my breath; the strident blare of the engines as I tumbled into the half-darkness, a blare which became



"Time to join the angels, mate'

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less intense as I dropped. Then the dropping eased. I felt as if I were being gently pulled up again into the sky. I looked up and caught a glimpse of the Barbarian, her wing-span silver in the moonlight, as she circled and turned back over the mountains. Then I saw something else, something which made my heart miss a beat. The canopy had not opened full. One side was bunched in. I was dropping too fast, much too fast.

I looked down at my feet. They were dangling over a huge yawning gulf of darkness and I realized that I had been dropped too high. Fool of a pilot, why had he made a mess of it? Feverishly I told myself to be calm, to take a grip of myself, to try to put things right again.

I looked up again, a little more calmly this time. The canopy was still half-open, I was still falling too fast. But it could be put right. The trouble lay in the rigging-lines. They were twisted. It was all right, for I knew what to do if this happened.

I reached with both hands above my head and tugged at the lines. Then I kicked into the air, kicked and kicked until gradually the canopy flowered to a full opening. Once again I was drawn gently up into the sky. The movement slackened gradually, and all spinning stopped. I was floating gently down in the cold and shining night.

The earth rose up to meet me. I didn't like the look of those dark, unfathomable shadows. There were too many of them, they reached too wide. They were the dips between mountain ridges which I had seen on my map, below the snow peaks but well to the north of the grass-clad alp where I had planned to be dropped. I shuddered at the thought of being bashed to pieces on those craggy heights.

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The wind was in my favour, which was some advantage, for it drifted me steadily south towards the alp. But not fast enough. I reached up with both hands, caught hold of my lines and pulled them downwards in an effort to help the wind to blow me southwards. I became so engrossed with the lines that I forgot about the earth. When next I looked it was clawing up at me, craggy with deep ravines and dark forests, and the dim thunder of a mountain torrent broke the silence of the night. I looked in panic for that torrent, expecting the moon to pick out the white swirl of its waters. But I couldn't see it. It must have been deep down between the cliffs, too deep for the moon to reach.

Down and down and down.

I was part of the earth now. I no longer belonged to the sky.

I just missed one ridge, almost grazing it with my boot. I saw the next one, all smudged over with trees, and the yawning, roaring darkness between — and with a splash of white where the moonlight hit the water far below. There was nothing much I could do about it now.

I bunched my legs up into my stomach and covered my face with both arms. Something brushed against my side; something else hit my shoulder, hard. There was a crashing, splitting noise which for a few seconds drowned the roar of the torrent. A weight struck both shoulders at the same time, jerking me to a full stop.

I put my hand out to discover what I had hit, but there was nothing there. I put out the other hand and felt the leaves of a tree. It was a soft feel, like the touch of a soft brush. Probably a larch. I'd hit a tree on the south side of the ravine.

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I looked up, expecting to see the canopy draped above me. But all I could see was more branches, then some rock, and higher still a steady flicker of white, too small for the canopy. I couldn't make out why the roar of the torrent was coming from there, above my head, right up in the sky.

Then I realized I was hanging upside down.



CHAPTER IV

PRYING EYES

You must be pretty smart to manage to land upside down from a parachute jump. If I jumped every day for the rest of my life, I doubt if I'd manage to do it again.

I was jammed in the cleft between two branches. They were so close I guessed I must be pretty near the bole of the tree. I found I could move my left arm from the elbow downwards; my right was wedged and I couldn't do much more than waggle the wrist. Another branch lay right across my stomach, and nothing but twigs obstructed my legs. Cautiously I waggled both in turn — cautiously because I didn't want to upset my precarious balance. It would be no joke taking a header onto the boulders below. But I didn't budge an inch. I was too firmly wedged.

It occurred to me that it was perhaps my harness more

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than the branches that was constricting me, and that if I could reach the safety-release box across my chest I might free myself. A sharp tap on the control disc was all that was needed to release the locking pins. The chances were that the branch across my stomach would prevent my falling. I tried to reach up with my left arm, but the branch was too thick and stopped me.

If you've ever stood upside down for more than a few seconds, you'll understand what I felt like, with the blood rushing to my head and fuddling my brain. I must do something quickly. I couldn't stand this much longer.

I took a risk and lunged down with both feet, trusting to the weight of my nailed boots to lever my legs down and raise my shoulders. My first attempt snapped a lot of small twigs and eased one shoulder. My second raised me clear of the cleft and freed both arms from the shoulder. I was able to use both hands to push my body upwards and transfer all my weight on to the upper branch. The rest was easy. With the canopy draping the tree top, the rigging lines were firm enough for me to haul myself up with, and in a minute I was sitting on the branch with my back against the bole.

I felt myself all over to see if anything was broken; but apart from scraped shins, scratched face, sores and bruises in most places, and some dizziness in the head, I was fit enough. As far as I could judge, I hadn't even a cracked rib. It seemed unbelievable, but I suppose the truth is that the upper branches had cushioned my fall.

I took a pull at my rum flask, and it sent a thrill of warmth through my chilled body. I needed it, for the night was bitterly cold for late summer and a clammy dampness was oozing up from the torrent. Then I

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waited as patiently as I could while the night dragged out the endless chilly hours till dawn.

As soon as it was light enough to see, I tapped the safety-release box, slipped out of my harness, and monkeyed my way down to the foot of the tree. I saw that it was growing in a cleft between two tall slabs of rock, and that the rock was broken up like this all the way down to the torrent, with the trees growing thicker towards the bottom. The ravine was nowhere too steep to climb even in my clumsy kit, and I was soon down where the torrent was pounding and squeezing its way through the boulders. Standing on one of these, I looked up and saw the parachute draped over the tree-top like someone's washing spread on a bush to dry — a tell-tale mark for prying eyes. All tangled and torn and speared with branches, it would take me days to get it down, and I'd probably break my neck in the effort. I decided to chance leaving it there and make my escape before it was spotted.

But first I must have some food. The cold and exposure had made me ravenous, so I sat down by the torrent and wolfed most of my rations. The best item was a tin of soup. I lit the fuse attached underneath, let it burn till it was exhausted, then prized the tin open with the patent opener. It was as hot and satisfying a dish as I have ever tasted.

Chuckling the empty tin and the sandwich paper into the torrent, I took my bearings with the compass and examined the map to find out where I was — but with little result. The ground immediately south of the mountains was all scarred with ravines such as this. The torrent might be any of fifty that disgorged glacier water

into the valleys below. My plan must be to follow the torrent down till the country was more open.

I wormed my way downstream along the edge of the torrent, dodging trees and boulders and all the cumbersome refuse the spring water had piled up. Dressed as I was, it was a slow and clumsy business, but I didn't want to shed my kit till I was further from the parachute.

After an hour, my progress came to an abrupt finish. There was no more land for me to walk on, for the torrent met another one to the south. I was only on a spit of land, and unless I could cross the torrent somehow there was no possibility of getting further. I sat on top of the last boulder and watched the two roaring streams meet in a burst of white foam and pound away round a bend in a stream as broad as a small river. The wooded cliff rose steeply on either side, three or four hundred feet high in places, with ample cover for concealing spies. I hoped there was nobody about, for I must have been a very obvious target. But the place seemed so wild and friendless I couldn't imagine anyone being attracted to it.

There being no way for me to cross at the end of the spit, I walked upstream on the south side, following the course of the other torrent, till I came to a likely spot. A big round-nosed boulder parted the water in mid-stream, with several smaller ones beyond, all of them — as far as I could judge from where I stood — within jumping distance of each other. A fallen pine bridged the first half of the torrent, as far as the round-nosed boulder. It was as convenient a spot for crossing as I could hope to find, the only snag being that I could not expect to get over in the bulky outfit I was wearing. I made up my mind to shed my parachute suit and bury it at once.

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What a relief it was to peel the wretched thing off! I soon had the pockets emptied and everything I needed transferred to the pockets of the peasant clothes I wore underneath. I never needed to use the spade, as there was a fine hiding-place between two rocks. After a hasty glance round, I rammed it down here, burying it and all else I didn't need, under a pile of loose stones. Then I turned my attention to the task of crossing the torrent.

Heights don't make me dizzy, and when I'm climbing mountains I can look down over a thousand foot cliff without turning green. That tree trunk was a bare five feet above the torrent and wide enough to walk on, but three steps along it made me feel sick. I didn't like the water; its roar was deafening, and I knew that a slip would mean being churned into the swirl or dashed to bits on the first boulder. That trunk had some spring in it too — it bounced like a springboard, and there was one frightful moment when I almost lost my balance. After the mid-stream boulder the torrent was just as fast, but the boulders were close and broad-surfaced and I bounded across to the shore quite happily. Then I dived into the undergrowth and brushed my way through till I was well under the trees.

Almost at once, to my great astonishment, I blundered into a path, a clearly defined track between the trees that followed the course of the torrent. It pulled me up dead all right — there was the print of bootnails in the dust. And I'd thought that no one came near this wilderness. What a fool I'd been to expose myself so rashly, to hide my kit in full view of this path. Had I been seen?

Well, it was no use worrying now. Peter Howarth lay buried with his kit in that stony place between the rocks.

I must forget about him and remember that I was Petr Novak, the Silvanian Highlander. So Petr Novak slouched along down the path with the bowed shoulders and the heavy sag at the knees that are the sign of the labourer; and all the time he tried to appear a good deal more carefree than he was feeling.

The path grew broader as I went on, and the side of the ravine less steep. There were signs that it might soon flatten altogether. Where should I find myself then? In a forest? Close to some village, or where? I became more than ever curious to know where I was. With a glance to see I wasn't being followed I turned aside from the path, behind a thicket of wild raspberries, meaning to open my map and see if I could discover where I was.

But my map wasn't in my pocket. My most important possession was missing.

I turned out the contents of every pocket and spilt them on the ground — compass, knife, torch, shaving-gear, everything. Then I put them back and turned them out all over again, trying to kid myself that I hadn't left it behind with the kit. I remembered the map pocket with the zip fastener; it had nothing else in it, and the map packed flat, with no bulge in it. That's why I had forgotten it. Of course I must go back and fetch it.

It was a temptation to run, for I was sick with myself for the waste of time and in a foul temper besides. But a run might give me away, so I resisted the temptation and kept the pace down to a brisk walk. When I reached my fording place, I waited a full ten minutes before crossing, carefully scanning both sides of the torrent and the heights as well. I wanted to be perfectly sure nobody would see me.

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Crossing that fallen trunk the other way wasn't so bad. I stood up and walked the last six steps. On the far side by way of pretence I paused to toss one or two big *stones into the water to see what sort of splash they made.* Then, very casually, *I strolled to the hiding-place between the rocks.*

It was empty. My kit had been stolen.



CHAPTER V

I MEET SERGEANT DE KRETSEK

IT was not the loss of the kit that took my breath away, for I had no further use for anything but the map. It was the realization that my secret had been discovered — and I'd not yet been more than a few hours in Silvania. I was so stunned that for some minutes all I could do was sit on the stones with my head in my hand cursing myself for having been so careless. *Hill and meadow, stick and stone have eyes and ears — you're never alone.* How often that lesson had been drummed into me at the security school; it was the first thing a spy learnt and should have been as familiar to me as the ABC. And now, for want of a grain of common sense, I'd gone and blundered into the first trap.

What was to be done now? Well, it was no use mooning around here. I must get away as quickly as possible.

I got up and peered cautiously round the boulder. I

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looked across the torrent to the far side, carefully scanning the woods and the heights above. I looked behind me, all round me. Everything was just the same as it had been five minutes ago; yet it was quite different. I felt there were eyes behind every bush and tree and rock, and that as soon as I left my cover I should be watched, perhaps shot.

My third crossing of the torrent was the most frightening of all, for I was right out in the open. A single shot, and either the bullet or the water would finish me. I almost ran over the tree trunk and bounded over the boulders like a chamois. What a relief it was to reach the shelter of the woods safely!

I took the path to the valley—the same path as before—and ran for all I was worth, hoping that if anyone were following I should outstrip him. My heavy mountain boots weren't much help to me. I kept stubbing the toes against stones, and once I tripped and took a header into the bushes, tearing my sleeve on a bramble. I remember how the trees muffled the noise of the torrent, and how my footsteps echoed loud against the crags so that I had the sensation of being stalked by a giant in iron boots. I met an old man leading a laden mule. As I ran past, I caught my wrist against the mule's pannier and it almost spun me off my balance. The name the old man shouted after me wasn't a polite one. In the end I got so out of breath (my lungs were going full blow like a blacksmith's bellows) I couldn't keep it up any longer. I dropped down to walking pace.

Just as well I did, for I had hardly reached the part where the ridge falls away and the valley begins to broaden when I met a soldier. He was a small man, wear-

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ing a green-grey battledress, with a cloak falling back from his neck, and a rifle slung over his right shoulder. Three red tabs on either side of his collar marked him out as a sergeant, while the high crown and wide brim of his cap showed that he belonged to a regiment of Mountain Chasseurs. He wasn't a Silvanian soldier, oh lord no . . . He was a "Yug". It was my first contact with the enemy.

I passed him with surly indifference and without giving the customary Silvanian greeting. But he told me in a curt voice to halt.

I obeyed.

"What's your name?" he barked. His accent was harsh and foreign, nothing like the soft drawl of the Silvanian.

"Petr Novak," I replied quietly.

"Your work?"

"I work in the vineyard." I kept my thumbs thrust into my trouser pockets and my fists closed. I didn't want him to see that my hands were soft, not hard and cracked like a vinesman's.

"Let me see your papers." He pronounced the word "papers" and I couldn't help smiling. At least I spoke the language better than he did. He couldn't get me there.

I fumbled in several pockets and finally produced the creased, thumb-stained, grape-soiled identity card that Maclaren had faked for me. I watched the sergeant's face while he examined it. He had an enormous beak of a nose for so small a man, and it seemed to divide his face into two separate halves. The eyes were deep-set and very tiny, the mouth a hard, cruelly straight line.

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After examining the card closely for a long while, he folded it and handed it back to me.

"Where are you going?" he snapped.

"Back to my work, fast as my legs will carry me."

"How far is it?"

That was a question I'd not bargained for. The name of my village, Drebic, was written on the card. I had learnt up plenty about it and I knew the farm. But I hadn't the faintest idea where I was at present. How could I answer his question?

I pretended to be exasperated with so many questions and asked him heatedly why he was so suspicious.

He didn't answer me, but I already realized from his attitude that this was no routine check-up. I suspected that the plane had been heard last night and the alarm about a parachute spy had already spread. Either this, or there was trouble of some sort with the hillmen.

I made up something about a plague of hay-moth in the vines, said I must hurry back and couldn't waste time arguing, etc. etc. I finished up by wishing him good day and trying to brush past him. But he caught my arm and, holding it in a grip that made me wince, repeated his question in his sharp, metallic voice.

"It will take me till the afternoon to get there," I said. It was a wild guess, but at least it left me an opening for explanation if he pressed the question further.

At that moment I heard footsteps behind me. I turned round in time to see a boy come running towards us, his long lanky legs crunching into the pebbled path. A lock of dark hair had fallen over his forehead and flopped up and down as he ran. He tried to pull up suddenly when he saw us, but the slope was steep and he had to catch

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hold of my jacket to stop himself. Sweeping back his hair with a grubby hand, he grinned at me — his teeth shone white in his sunburnt face. Then he called me a clumsy oaf for blocking the path. To my astonishment he added, "Just like you. You're always where you're not wanted," as if he knew me well.

The soldier dropped my arm and turned to the boy. "Fancy meeting you, Emil!" he said. "What are you doing here?" He spoke much less harshly to the boy than to me.

The ingratiating tone and wheedling manner infuriated the boy. The smile vanished and his dark eyes flashed as he answered.

"Never mind what I'm doing here, Sergeant de Kretser. I know what you're here for, and I can tell you it's no use. You're too late."

"What do you mean?" said the sergeant.

"I mean that he's got away. The parachutist who came down in the night."

"Nonsense. He's not had time to get away. Anyway, what do you know about it?" The sergeant was trying hard to hide his uneasiness.

"Why should I tell you what I know?" cried the boy. "You won't leave us alone. The valley's not the same since you came. You want us to betray our friends. You spy on my father while he works in the vineyard. He's no sooner home from the terraces than you're on his tail, cadging wine from his cellar, pestering him with questions. You won't leave me alone either, with your dirty cadging presents. I don't want them. I don't want to be friends. *I hate you.*" He hissed out the last three words.

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It was an extraordinary scene that I was witnessing. Here was an unarmed country lad, who couldn't be more than fourteen or fifteen; and yet he had the guts to speak like this to a fully-armed enemy soldier. Many a patriot had been shot for saying less than that. I looked into de Kretser's eyes to see how he had taken it. But they betrayed nothing. He had kept his temper well.

"You're not obliged to tell me anything if you don't wish to, Emil," he said quietly, with just the tiniest fraction of contempt in his voice. "I'd like you to remember that we are not your enemies. We are not at war with your country. Our President has stated that he desires friendship, that our army is here to protect you from the destruction that would certainly have come to you had we not stepped in first. Of course, if you choose to obstruct me in my duty, that is another matter. I can make things unpleasant for you if you do that." He added with a nasty leer, "You remember what happened to the Ressels? Ressel once had a prosperous vineyard like your father, did he not?"

Emil's eyes dropped and he bit his lip.

"Now then, Emil," said de Kretser in a voice of velvety softness, "Will you tell me what you know?"

"I'm not standing here to see this boy bullied, sergeant," I broke in hotly. "You'd better leave him to me and go and find out for yourself if what he says is true."

De Kretser did not take his eyes off Emil.

"I think he'll talk without any more bullying," he said. "Won't you, Emil?"

"Very well, sergeant," said the boy. "But you must promise to leave my father alone. Go away and don't trouble us any more."

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"I give you my word," said de Kretser, and pointing to me he added, "Here is our witness."

It must have been a full minute before the boy replied. I wondered what was going on behind those dark fiery eyes, under that mop of tousled hair. My fate depended on what he was about to disclose. After all that had happened, I could not think that he meant to give me away. But I was on tenterhooks to know what he would say. When at last he spoke, he kept his eyes on the ground and blurted out the words very quickly, as if he was ashamed of himself.

"He came down in the ravine below the Roklesny glacier. The parachute's draped over a larch near the top."

"You said he got away," the sergeant pressed. "Which way did he go?"

Emil turned away and pointed behind him. "North," he said. "Towards the glacier. I saw him climb up by the edge of the torrent."

"You followed him?"

"No."

"Did you see him reach the glacier?"

"No. There are steep rocks all the way and no path. He could hardly have got there yet."

"I see," said de Kretser, disappointedly.

"Can I go now?"

De Kretser nodded.

"My friend as well?"

The sergeant hesitated. I think he had forgotten all about me, so keen was he to hear about the parachutist. Now he looked at me with new interest as a sudden idea struck him.

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"You're quite certain, Emil, that he *is* your friend? There's not a chance, I suppose, that the parachutist disguised himself as a highlander and turned south and *not north as you say?* I've asked your friend a very simple question, and he *hasn't yet given me an answer.*"

De Kretser's eyes were still on me. I was feeling very uncomfortable under that diabolical stare, and I hoped he wouldn't notice how my knees were trembling. Suddenly he jerked his head towards Emil and rapped out a question: "What's your friend's name? Tell me that and you shall both go."

I thought that was the end. The boy might have seen me in the ravine and followed me through the wood, but not by the remotest chance could he know my assumed name.

But Emil didn't hesitate. "Novak is his name," he answered, and there was defiance as well as triumph in his voice.

The sergeant nodded sulkily and without a word to either of us marched off up the path. I didn't wait to see him out of sight, but continued at once on my way, with this unknown boy striding along beside me. I was free — at least for the present. Nevertheless I felt that this would not be the last time I should meet Sergeant de Kretser.



CHAPTER VI

EMIL EXPLAINS

I FELT wonderfully exhilarated as I tramped down the steep zigzag path through the wood with Emil. There were lots of questions I was dying to ask him, but I thought it wiser to keep my mouth shut till we were clear of de Kretser and quite certain that he hadn't doubled back on us. In the meantime I watched the boy out of the corner of my eye, noticing his gaunt frame, the long arms and great bony hands which were almost a man's, and the spidery legs which close-fitting trousers made to look all the lankier. His most striking feature was his face. Nobody could call it handsome; it was too square for that. But it was amazingly vigorous, bubbling over with life and energy; his dark eyes sparkled, and there was a chuckle on his lips that he was trying hard to stifle. Every

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now and then he dived into a thicket, then came bounding after me a few moments later with a handful of squashed wild raspberries.

When I thought we were out of danger, I asked him my first question, "What became of the Ressels?" Of all the questions I wanted to ask, it was easily the least pressing, and I can't think why I put it first. He told me briefly that the parents had been deported, while the children, Oto and Jirina, had been left behind. He gave no reason, and I didn't press the matter further.

We came to a small brook, tumbling gaily over the rocks in a series of gentle waterfalls. It was a good place to sit down and talk, for the noise of the water was loud enough to drown our conversation.

"How did you know my name?" I asked.

Emil laughed and, plunging a hand into his shirt, drew out my map — the one I had left by mistake with my kit. It was crumpled and sweat-stained now.

"There is your name," he said, and pointed to where I had written it on the cover.

"I'd forgotten I'd ever written it there," I said, taking the map from him and stowing it in my shirt. "I guessed it was you who had found my kit, but I never expected you to know my name. That was a smart dodge, Emil. But I had the fright of my life when I found the kit had gone."

"Serves you right for your clumsiness," he laughed. "If I'd been de Kretser and had a rifle, I could have picked you off a dozen times, and you'd be where your kit is now."

"Where's that?"

"At the bottom of the torrent. I tied it to a big

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stone and sank it in a pot-hole. No one will find it now."

He went on to tell me how he had seen my parachute float down in the night; how he had waited till dawn and then climbed to the top of the next ravine, where the canopy out-spread on the larch had betrayed my position. Being on the wrong side, it wasn't till I showed myself at the fork of the two ravines that he first spotted me. He saw me bury the kit and cross the torrent. When I was well into the forest, as he was curious to know who I was, he retrieved it, then sank it and followed me. "I wanted to catch you up and warn you."

"You know that de Kretser was about?"

"I didn't expect him so soon. But I knew he must find out soon. Your plane was so noisy and the parachute showed up so clearly in the moonlight. It was foolish to drop when the moon was full."

"The pilot missed the dropping zone," I said. "And we didn't expect the enemy to be so far north yet."

"There's a soldier in every village about here. They're here to spy on us, to nose out the Resistance. If they find anything suspicious, they phone to headquarters and next thing you see is a truckful of the swine pouring up the valley in a cloud of dust. Nobody's safe now."

I asked him then about his parents and their vineyard and how it was that he came to be up here in the mountains instead of at home. From all I knew of vineyards, August was one of the busiest times of the year, when every able-bodied member of the family was drawn in to help.

He didn't like the question. He turned down the corners of his mouth and shrugged his shoulders and said quietly, "I ran away."

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I asked him why.

He turned on me with wide, angry eyes and shouted, "Why should I tell you?" Next moment he had picked up a hefty stone and, raising it above his head with both hands, hurled it with all his might into the deepest part of the brook, splashing me all over from head to foot. By the time I had brushed the water from my face and eyes, he had vanished into the wood.

I was more than ever puzzled. This strange, wild, temperamental lad, whose courage had just now saved my life, evidently needed careful handling if he was to remain my friend.

I took out the map and compass and tried to work out where I was. I was becoming quite absorbed when I heard a voice over my shoulder.

"Maps are made for the fools who don't use their eyes and their senses. I can't read them myself. I don't need to. But I can tell you what your map can't. I can tell you where you'll be safe tonight. I'll take you to a place where de Kretser can't find you."

It was Emil and he seemed quite recovered from his burst of temper. Folding the map, I put it away and got up and followed him down through the wood. Soon I heard the tinkle of cow-bells below us, and not long after that we emerged from the cool shade of the pines into an open pasturage with luscious green grass and cows grazing. They seemed so peaceful and unconcerned as they bent their thick-folded, bell-heavy necks to the turf, with the grasshoppers chirruping away merrily all round.

My eyes blinked in the strong sunlight. Shading them with my hand, I looked beyond the pasturage and saw the foothills of the Silvanian Alps fall away to the



Emil's Cave

valley and the blue sky beyond. To the west of the pasturage, out of sight and muffled by the wooded walls of the ravine, the torrent pounded its way down to the valley. Behind me and not yet visible were the glaciers and the white peaks that marked the frontier. Though there was too much heat haze for me to see far ahead, I could yet see enough to judge roughly where I was. A small peak to the east and below the snow line must be the Tiger's Tooth, a jagged sentinel that I recognized from the plasticine model of the landscape that had been built for me. It was on the pasturage below the Tiger's Tooth that the pilot should have dropped me, above the woods that sheltered the vine terraces of Drebic from the north winds.

I took a deep breath and sighed. Everything seemed so calm and serene, so remote from the intrigues and turmoil of war.

"Look," said Emil, pointing to a curl of blue smoke at the foot of the pasturage. "There's the hut where I spent last night and the night before. The cowherd is a good friend of mine."

I could not of course stay here, for the hut was on the direct route to the valley. So Emil took me at once to his secret hiding-place. It was a fair distance away — a cave near the rim of a wild ravine where the crag was bare of trees.

"Nobody in the world knows it but me," he said. "If all the armies in Europe marched up our valley, they wouldn't find you here."

The entrance to the cave was narrow, like the neck of a bottle. In fact the whole cave was shaped rather like a bottle. I could just stand upright in the middle. Two

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shafts of light came through cracks in the far wall. The floor was of caked mud and the atmosphere distinctly damp.

Emil went back to the hut to warn Illek the cowherd about de Kretser and to fetch me food and a blanket. It was nearly dark when he returned, carrying a billycan of food and a wine bottle filled with milk.

While I was eating I told him something of my mission and of my anxiety to accomplish it as soon as possible. He listened greedily to every word.

"You left home because they wouldn't let you join the Resistance, didn't you?" I said.

"How did you know?"

"I guessed. I feel I know you well already, Emil. You're ambitious, you're big for your age. You're not content to hoe vines when lads a few years older and no bigger than yourself are shouldering rifles in the Resistance. But your father was right not to let you join, all the same."

"I'm *going* to join," he said stubbornly.

"How about helping me instead? I'll need your help, as you'll soon see. I know I can trust you and I'm going to tell you my secret."

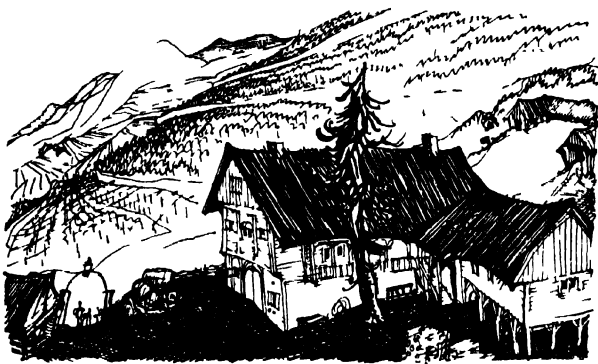
His eyes sparkled, and he seized my hand in both of his and shook it.

I told him then about Helpmann and the Radar-beam camera. The camera mystified him completely. But when I told him of the message on the telephone pad, he became quite helpful. Not only had he been to Kastelnau and Kennec, two hamlets within ten or fifteen kilometres of Javor, but he knew the names of several farmers there and exactly how to get there. I asked him if there was a

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laboratory at either of these places, but he didn't know what the word meant. I did my best to explain, but he only shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. I began to wonder if "lab" could possibly stand for anything else. From what Emil told me of the district, it seemed ridiculous to associate it with scientific research. He agreed to take me with him to the farm tomorrow. If de Kretser were still on my track I hoped to persuade Emil's father to engage me — in theory if not in practice — as a labourer in the vineyards.

It was dark when he left me, and a brisk east wind with a bitter edge to it had started up a fine commotion in the trees. Seeking the shelter of the cave, I wrapped myself up in the blanket and stretched myself full length on the mud-caked floor, in the hope of a good night's rest. What a hope! It was almost as draughty inside as out, for the cave was a kind of corridor for the wind to whistle through. After various experiments, I found the bottom end the least draughty, and by lying across the end with my back pressed against the rock I managed to stop the wind from bellying out my blanket. My worst discomfort was the damp floor. In a sunless spot like this I suppose it never got a chance to dry out proper. . My blanket soaked up the wet, and I was soon lying in a soggy warmth almost as trying as the draught had been before. I changed my position a hundred times, but I couldn't get to sleep. I crawled out of the cave to exercise my cramped limbs in the open. But I turned back at once, for the rain had started and was cutting across the ridge in icy gusts. I didn't sleep a wink all night.



CHAPTER VII

THE VINE FARM BELOW THE MOUNTAINS

EMIL found me in the morning in none too civil a mood. My legs and arms were so stiff I could hardly crawl out of the cave. When I stood up and tried to walk, my movements were as jerky as a wooden soldier's. Rain was drizzling down from a leaden sky. But I wasn't going back into that cave again.

We sat under a pine with our backs to the bole, while I stuffed down the breakfast he had brought me.

"De Kretser called at the hut while I was here with you last night," said Emil. "He thinks he has been tricked. He searched the place from top to bottom. He even forked through the hay in the loft."

"What did Illek tell him?"

"That you'd gone back to work. He didn't say where."

VINE FARM BELOW THE MOUNTAINS

"And de Kretser — where did he go?"

"West, to the mountains. He's thoroughly mystified."

"We're going to your father's right now. I'm as stiff as a corpse."

I was thankful to be on the move at last, and as the circulation warmed back into my limbs my temper mended.

All morning we slogged through the dripping trees, and the leaves went on spilling the wet on to our heads long after the rain had stopped. Afternoon brought us to the open hillside and the first of the terraces on Emil's farm. Below, like a giant's stairway, the other terraces marched down the hill to the farm buildings. I noticed how neat the vines were, all of them tied back in line, and not a weed showing. The clusters of grapes hung heavily, and they were already beginning to take on colour. If I were Emil's father, Josef Mendl, I should be mighty proud of them.

We came to a long shed with open ends, inside which roughly hewn posts were stacked in tiers to dry out. These had been cut from the wood lot to replace the rotted vine posts for next season and, as Emil explained, his father usually spent wet days trimming and shaping them. But the shed was empty. He wasn't here today.

"Wait here for me, Petr," said Emil. "It will be best if I find my father by myself and explain to him. He can't be far away on a day like this."

He wasn't. Emil must have stumbled upon him in a yard, just the other side of the wood shed, for I heard a deep male voice bellow out a mouthful not meant for my ears. Emil was being scolded. Soon they went indoors and I heard nothing but the clucking of hens in the yard

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and the grunting of pigs. I waited a long time. I guess Emil had plenty of other things to explain besides me.

But he came at last, bringing his father with him, a *great massive stooping fellow, with clear, piercing eyes, a drooping moustache, and a battered hat tilted to the back of his head.* He removed the hat when he saw me, not out of politeness but so as to be able to scratch his head with his thumb while he searched me critically up and down.

"What do you want?" he said bluntly.

"Emil has told you who I am?"

The farmer nodded.

"Can I stay here tonight — perhaps for a day or two?"

"And make trouble for us? If the sergeant catches you, he'll burn the farm and I shall be deported. It's not worth it. I'm a farmer — I have my vines, my land, my cows and pigs to keep me busy — and my own life to lead. We want to live in peace."

"Time enough for peace and quiet when the war is won and the invaders have been driven out of your country," I said meaningly.

He turned down the corners of his mouth and spread out his hands hopelessly.

"Why must you meddle in our business?" he said. "It's playing with fire. The time is not ripe yet."

"Very well, I'll go. I don't wish to bring you into danger. Your son has already saved my life. I shall not forget that. If I can ever do anything for you in return, I shall. Goodbye."

I held out my hand, but he didn't take it. Instead he put his arm round my shoulders and told me to follow him indoors.

VINE FARM BELOW THE MOUNTAINS .

"You're not fit to walk as far as Valdec. You're dropping in your shoes, man," he said, as we walked across the stone-flagged yard with the hens and ducks and geese squawking about our feet. *"What you need is rest for the body and good fare for the belly. I'm not turning you away like this."*

I was surprised at the sudden change in his manner.

"You can hide me in the barn, Josef Mendl," I said. "I shall be out of your way there. I'm too tired to eat. All I need is a heap of dry straw and —"

He wasn't listening. He was already up the stone steps, heaving open the oak door with its massive iron hinge, and beckoning me to follow. I took a grip of the iron railing and followed him up.

I found myself in the main room of the farm, an enormous room as big as a small courtyard. A long stairway ran up one wall to a balcony which reached the whole length of the back wall. Two doors, presumably bedrooms, opened on to the balcony, and there were four or five more downstairs. The floor was partly of stone and partly of brick, and a long oak table with benches on either side ran from where I was standing to the wall under the balcony. A square porcelain-tile stove of the type found in most Silvanian homes occupied the centre of the room. There was also a big oak dresser half hidden by crockery and kitchen utensils, a small range, a copper, a grandfather's clock with a monstrous tick, and in the far corner a brick erection which looked like a bread oven.

Josef Mendl pushed the door to with his elbow. "Mother!" he called, in a stentorian voice which echoed up to the ceiling. "Step downstairs and take a look

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at what our rapsallion son has brought home with him."

This was hardly a flattering introduction. It made me feel like a bit of wreckage washed up with the tide. Well, *I wasn't feeling any too grand. Two nights of exposure and the long trudge in the rain were beginning to make their mark. My limbs were stiff and cramped, my head dizzy. Once or twice during the march I had been attacked by fits of dizziness, but they had not lasted long and I had thought nothing of them.*

One of the balcony doors opened and a woman came out and peered over the banisters. She was wearing a white blouse gaily embroidered in the peasant style and a full black skirt with a bright border. In one arm she carried a baby.

"He can do with a square meal from the looks of him," said Josef Mendl, as she hurried down the stairs.

She frowned at me. "It's not food he's wanting but a warm bed. Emil dear, take the baby. I'll make up the bed for him."

Such is the power of suggestion that I immediately felt a lot worse. A sudden pain shot through my back, and the dizziness in my head increased. I sat down on the bench. The dizziness became overpowering, and the next thing I remembered was an iron bedstead with two shining brass knobs at the foot. I was lying on a feather mattress with a huge white eiderdown, big-bellied as a cloud, floating on top of me. It was the Mendls' own bedroom, I learnt later. The room was very stuffy indeed, and so was my head. A basin of steaming gruel brought by Madame Mendl banished some of the stuffiness in my head and put some much needed central heating in my chilly limbs.

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In the evening I sat up with a shawl round my shoulders, and I was well enough to be mad with myself for going sick so easily. Time was running short. Helpmann must be found, and found quickly. And here was I, lying helpless in bed, and with no further clue to his whereabouts than I had a month ago.

My thoughts drifted to the message Helpmann had written on the telephone pad. I had not yet solved the mystery of the last three letters. Couldn't I give it a bit of attention now?

On my bedside table was a candlestick and a box of matches. Pushing back the eiderdown, I emptied some of the matches on to the blanket in front of me. These I laid down in such a way as to spell out the letters and figures of Helpmann's message, breaking some of the match sticks to form the smaller letters:

M.J.K. → 16k lab

Then I lay back on my pillows and stared at it, hoping that if I concentrated hard enough some bright idea would emerge.

I stared at it for hours, till the last daylight had gone and a whole candle had burnt through. Madame Wendt came in with a drink of hot milk. She made a move to tidy up the spilt matches, but I told her to leave them alone. I'm sure she thought I was mad. But as I waved her aside, one of the matches slid out of place, falling across the L of LAB. Thus the L looked like a T.

"Tab, tab, tab," I said out loud.

Then suddenly I yelled out, "TABERNA! I've got it at last. It must be!" And in my excitement I spilt the matches off the bed and onto the floor.

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"Yes, I've solved the riddle," I cried in English, forgetting I was now a Silvanian. "*Taberna* is Silvanian for inn. Helpmann wrote it down in a hurry and didn't have time to cross the τ ."

I think Madame Mendl thought me possessed with a devil, for I saw her turn to the statuette of the Virgin that stood in the window niche and cross herself devoutly.

"Tell me quickly, Madame Mendl. Is there an inn at Kastelnau?"

"Not that I know," she said. "There's the Martinus's farm and —"

"Is there one at Kennec?"

"Oh yes, there's a fine inn at Kennec, and a rare fine innkeeper too. He's got a black beard."

"Bless you, Madame Mendl, and bless the innkeeper's black beard. Please tell Emil to come to me."

Madame Mendl lifted both hands with the palms open. "We packed him off to bed an hour ago," she said. "And that's the proper place for a boy of his age."

I begged her to fetch him. And she did.

He came in bare-footed and stood by my bed in his sack-like sleeping suit, blinking, and sweeping his long hair back from his eyes. I told him of my discovery and asked him what he knew about the inn. What he told me made it quite certain. Helpmann was at the inn at Kennec — or had been there. At any rate I should get news of him there, if it wasn't already too late.

"I'm going straight there in the morning, Emil," I said.

"So far? You look as if you hadn't the strength to walk across the room."

"I'll be all right in the morning. Off to bed with you now, Emil, or I'll be in trouble from your mother."

VINE FARM BELOW THE MOUNTAINS .

He gave me a quizzical look as he went out of the door.

Then I blew out the candle and lay back on my pillows.

My discovery was not the tonic it ought to have been. In spite of an exceptionally comfortable bed, I had another miserable night, tossing and turning, changing position continually and able to sleep only for short intervals. I was feverish, chilled to the bone. I piled my clothes on top of the thick feather eiderdown, and still I shivered. In the morning I woke from a brief interval of sleep to see Madame Mendl bending over me with an anxious look on her face. My throat was dry as a desert, burning pads pressed behind my eyeballs, and the bedclothes and my borrowed nightshirt were wringing wet with sweat.

"Let me see your tongue," she said

It was a job to get it unstuck, my throat was so dry. I said I must get up, that it was time I was going.

"Young man, if you leave this room before Sunday, it will be in your coffin. Stay where you are."

She went out of the room.



CHAPTER VIII

"I DON'T REMEMBER MEETING YOU BEFORE"

I HAD spent part of my youth in East Africa, where my father had held a Colonial appointment. Just before my return to Europe I was laid low with an obscure fever known locally as swamp fever, and I had twice had bouts of it since, though not in recent years. I suppose the germ lies latent in the blood and is liable to attack when body resistance is low, though I must admit that, until my experience at the Mendls' farm, I thought I had thrown it off for good.

For three days the fever raged, leaving me prostrate and helpless. My memories of those days are confused. I remember my overpowering thirst and how, the more I drank, the thirstier I grew. I lay all the time in a bath of sweat, continually changing position to try to find a cool spot in the bed. Madame Mendl says I was delirious

"I DON'T REMEMBER MEETING YOU"

half the time, jabbering streams of incoherent speech from which she caught the name of Helpmann more than once. And indeed I do vaguely recall a nightmare in which Helpmann was involved. He was at the bottom of a great chasm, roasting over flames with yellow shooting tongues, being slowly turned over and over on a spit. I was on the rim of the chasm, being chased round and round by a hairy devil with red eyes and a long fork with a very sharp point. The devil was Maclaren, and he kept yelling at me to leap over the edge and rescue Helpmann before he was roasted to death. I remember also a succession of dim figures round my bedside, of which Madame Mendl's was the most frequent. What I should have done without her I can't imagine, for she nursed me as devotedly as if I were one of the family. Josef told me that on the second night, when the fever was at its height, she never left my bedside. I must have been a most trying patient, and I have always regretted that I never spoke out my gratitude enough.

Among these bedside figures there was one I couldn't place at all; he had a thin, ascetic face, and wore pince-nez on the end of his nose and a biretta on his grey head. They told me afterwards he was the priest from the village, and they had first called him in to pray at my bedside. On his second visit, after the alarm had died down, he came in the role of amateur doctor — a role in which he fancied himself not a little. The village was too small to justify a doctor, and in time of illness everyone turned to him. Peasants in Silvania instinctively go to a priest when things go wrong. If his efforts on my behalf were at all typical of his medical skill, he must surely have killed more than he cured.

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On the fourth day, when the fever had passed and I was able to sit up in bed and eat solid food, he paid his customary daily visit. It cost him his thermometer to find out that my temperature was normal, for his hand shook like a willow leaf and he dropped it on the hard floor when he had read it. I learnt afterwards that he was always breaking thermometers and for this reason made a point of carrying at least one spare one tucked away somewhere in his black robe. He said he was delighted with my progress and gave me a spoonful of some vile treacly medicine which immediately made me feel ill again. Then he sat himself down on the foot of the bed, curled his legs up underneath him, and talked to me for half an hour about the Resistance. He told me that most of the young men were eager to join, but there weren't enough arms to go round. Ammunition was so short that very little could be spared for practice firing, and this meant that they couldn't be trained properly. But how he stormed against the enemy! Never have I heard a priest breath out more fire and slaughter than he did.

"He's chief organizer of the Resistance in the district," Madame Mendl told me afterwards. "Tears about the country on his bicycle, preaching everywhere and cursing the enemy from every pulpit, chair and soap-box he perches on. The Bishop warned him to be careful, but he doesn't take any notice. You never heard such a preacher. He forgets all about the time and goes on for hours. And you should see him on his bicycle!" She whirled her hands round in imitation of flying pedals.

He was to appear again later at a critical moment in

"I DON'T REMEMBER MEETING YOU"

my adventures, as you shall hear. I never learnt his name. He was known everywhere as "the battling priest", and that's how I always think of him.

I got up in the afternoon and walked, or rather staggered, across the room and back again. I was glad to tumble into bed again, for my attack of swamp fever, though there was nothing dangerous or alarming about it, had left me ridiculously weak about the legs. I asked Madame for the loan of a mirror, so that I could shave. She unhooked an ornamental gilt-edged monstrosity from the wall — a clumsy, unwieldy thing — and propped it up on the bed against my raised knees. I was thus presented with a free portrait of myself in a gilt frame, and it was about as unflattering a work of art as I've ever seen. Worse than any Picasso portrait — you know the Picasso style; one eye in the forehead, another in the neck, a ghastly tomb-like grin, and the colouring ashen grey all over. My cheeks were hollow, my eyes unnaturally bright; there was a pale stubble on my chin, and my adam's apple stood out most unpleasantly. I looked ten years older. I hoped a shave would smarten things up a bit, but it didn't.

Thanks to my training and general fitness I made a quick recovery. I felt much better on the fifth day and was able to spend most of it downstairs in the big kitchen. This cheered me up a lot. Besides, I was heartily thankful to save Madame Mendl the fag of carting everything up to the bedroom. Goodness, how that woman worked! A dozen people sat down to the midday meal, a magnificent spread with pork and potatoes and piles of spaghetti, then a cheese *fondue*, a sweet, and carafes of red and white wine. Quite enough for one pair of hands to prepare.

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But each day she did a special light nourishing dish for me. In the afternoons she did household chores, or sat and mended wicker baskets in readiness for gathering the October harvest. Brisk and busy, she moved from task to task, invariably cheerful and light-hearted. And there was baby Maria to look after too. As you know, an eight-weeks-old baby makes plenty of work.

Emil did not once come to see me during my illness. This surprised me. I thought that Josef must be working him hard in the vineyards, to make up for his truancy last week. But when he failed to appear at the midday meal on the fifth day, I began to wonder what had happened to him. Noticing that mention of him was carefully avoided during the meal, I waited till the men had returned to the terraces before asking Madame Mendl where he was.

"I sent him to Kolenso to fetch the doctor that afternoon you were so ill," she said.

"He didn't come back?"

"No. We sent one of the labourers to see what had happened. He found the doctor's chalet locked up. Villagers said he'd gone to town for two days with a bad case. No one had seen Emil."

A chilling thought struck me—had de Kretser followed the boy and kidnapped him? But I kept the thought to myself and said, "I expect he's gone to town after the doctor. He probably had the wind up about me. You know, my illness looked a lot more alarming than it really was."

"On the contrary," said Madame Mendl, "he didn't take it as seriously as we did. He thought you'd get better if you were just left alone. If you ask me, he's

"I DON'T REMEMBER MEETING YOU"

taken the first chance of quitting home again. He hasn't liked being here ever since the baby came."

In spite of what Madame Mendl had said, the more I thought of the matter, the more convinced I became that de Kretser had something to do with the boy's absence.

When Josef came in from the terraces after the day's work was done, I noticed the tired, anxious lines in his face. Madame Mendl took his overalls and hung them on the hook behind the door; she brought him his slippers and filled the sink with steaming water from the copper for him to wash in. As soon as he had washed, his evening bowl of soup, filled with vegetables and meat and all sorts of nourishing ingredients, was ready on the table for him. But all these kind attentions were not enough to drive away his moodiness. He was angry with Emil for running off.

"He will be back home directly, you mark my words," said his wife. "It's only a boyish prank."

"He's been like it for months. Surly, disobedient, won't do a thing I tell him."

Madame Mendl took a pair of black stockings and some darning wool from her work-basket and sat down beside her husband.

"Boys of his age are often like that," she said. "It's a passing phase. He'll get over it in time and be a credit to us both."

I offered to go and search for him, for I felt responsible for his absence and was worried about what might have happened. But they would neither of them hear of my going. They said he was continually running off and would come back when he felt like it.

On the sixth day I was fit enough to lend a hand on the

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farm, and I helped Josef tackle the wasps which had for some days past been menacing the grapes. Wasps are always the biggest danger to vines at this time of year, for they suck the juice and leave holes in the grapes for flies and earwigs to enter. First we hung bottles of sweetened water in the vineyards. Then we sought out the nests, burnt sulphur underneath and, when the wasps were stupefied with the fumes, soused them with boiling water. Josef was more cheerful today, though I noticed his gaze kept wandering to the road in the hope, no doubt, of seeing Emil. My thoughts also were seldom far from the boy, and as time wore on I grew more and more certain that de Kretser was responsible for his continued absence. I made up my mind that, if he hadn't returned by the following evening, I should go and look for him, whatever the Mendls said.

Next morning we dealt with the last of the wasps' nests we could trace. I spent the afternoon among the vines with a pair of pruning scissors. My exertions left me tired, but not overtired; and, instead of retiring to bed immediately after supper as I had done the previous night, I sat up and played draughts with Josef by the light of the acetylene lamp.

We played two games and were packing up the draughts when I caught the sound of steps on the stone outside.

Madame Mendl got up from her wicker chair and laid her mending down. Josef turned his head slowly.

The door grated open and two figures came in.

"Emil!" cried Madame Mendl joyfully, and she ran to him and threw her arms round his neck. "Where have you been? We have been so anxious."

"I DON'T REMEMBER MEETING YQU"

As she unclasped him, the light of the acetylene lamp fell full on his face. The expression was radiant, not at all the expression of a boy who has played truant and is ashamed to face his parents.

"Well, Josef, aren't you going to greet him? Our boy is home again, and he has brought the doc — oh, but it isn't *our* doctor. Who is it, Emil?"

I tried to see who it was, but Emil was standing between us.

"I knew you'd be all right, Petr," said Emil, running to me and seizing my hand in both of his. His eyes were sparkling. "I always said you didn't need a *real* doctor." And he laughed.

What was the boy getting at?

The heavy front door banged to. It made me jump, and I looked past Emil at the figure now moving out of the shadows and coming slowly, shyly towards me. He was wearing a green gabardine cloak with a cape that fell back over his shoulders.

"Let me see my patient." He spoke Silvanian very badly, in a slow, drawling voice. .

He planted his hands on my shoulders and looked fixedly at me. I could not see his features clearly, for he had his back to the light.

"You have made a remarkable recovery," he announced. "You disappoint me, for my professional skill will not be needed. Why, sir, you look as young and fit as the last time I saw you, when —"

"I don't remember meeting you before," I said.

He threw back his head and laughed. The light fell upon his face. I recognized the kindly, humorous eyes and the wide and intelligent forehead. It was Helpmann.

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"It's a miracle!" I exclaimed. "You're everything in the world I've been praying for for weeks. The cat's whiskers!"

"What does this mean — the cat's wheeskers?" He spoke English with a strong foreign accent. "I do not understand."

"It means that you're perfect — a gift from heaven — the cat's whiskers. Oh, Helpmann, I can't believe it's really you."

The phrase tickled his fancy, and he tried it over once or twice, at the same time twirling his fingers round imaginary whiskers. "Ach, it is a picture this phrase, a picture! I remember it for ever. Now, what was I saying? Ah yes, the last time we meet. It is the Easter races. You are rowing bow, my friend — best college eight I ever see — magneeficent spurt — catch Trinity College — head of the river! Ach, you are the best of them all, the cat's wheeskers!"

And he shook my hand so violently that I began to fear it might drop off.



CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER VISITOR

So my mission was almost over. It had been accomplished for me while I slept by a young peasant boy on his own initiative. I could hardly believe it.

"You look at me, my friend — like I was a ghost?" said Helpmann. "Pinch me, I am real. Ow! Not you, Emil — you pinch too hard. Later on, I explain all. First you must assure me that what the boy tells me is true. You are sent by your government to rescue me from — from these sharks and murderers that call themselves a ci-vi-lized nation, from these — these — how shall I say?"

"Yugs," I said. "That's what we call them at home. Yugs."

"*Le mot juste*. You English, you always have the right word. Yugs . . . Ach, these Yugs hunt me up and down

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their country, they run after me like I was a sewage rat. Me, a scientist, a man of peace . . . But tell me, my friend, of your mission."

I told him as briefly as I could.

"Good, good," he said absent-mindedly. "Their secret police — ach! They hound me from my re-search-es, they question me, they trail me to Silvania. And all the time I have it, what they are looking for, under their noses. Un-der their no-ses. There, in the rucksack!"

He pointed to the rucksack on Emil's shoulders, adding, "It would not do for them to see what is in there."

"Cocoa," said Emil, chuckling.

"And why do you laugh, my boy? It is the best cocoa, the only cocoa. And not only cocoa is there but such inventions as every European government would give half its treasury to possess — ach, gently, my boy, gently, gently!"

Emil was unstrapping the rucksack from his shoulders and laying it down on the floor against the wall.

"We must hide the rucksack," said Emil. "De Kretser may be here tonight."

"We must lock the cellar, too," said Josef.

"It's not your wine, father, that he'll be after this time."

"Did he see you again — with Helpmann?" I asked.

"Yes," said Emil.

"Where?"

"Between Kolenso and Valdec. But I saw the patrol before then in the valley. That's why we decided Helpmann must pretend to be your doctor."

"Ah, more trouble," said Josef. "And I was going to bed."

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"You can go to bed, father, but leave us the cellar key," said Emil gaily. "Dr. Helpmann, have you tasted our Silvanian wine?"

"A pretty mess we shall be in if de Kretser calls while both of you are here," said Josef, glancing moodily first at Helpmann then at me.

There was an awkward silence and the tick of the grandfather's clock sounded louder than ever.

"Still, I accept the risk," he went on, with a slight gesture of the hand. "I have taken this Englishman under my roof and I must abide by the consequences."

"How ungraciously you talk, Josef!" said Madame Mendl. "Anyone would think you welcomed the enemy into Silvania."

"My dear, I hate them as much as you do, as much as we all do. But our friends here — the Englishman, the scientist — they have come too soon. We are not ready."

"Let me fetch the wine," said Madame Mendl. "It will cheer us all."

Madame Mendl brought the glasses and two bottles of wine, which she set down on the table in front of Josef. We edged along the bench towards him.

"Ach, wine, Silvanian wine, it is superb," said Helpmann.

"Better than your cocoa," said Emil.

"What's all this about cocoa?" I asked.

No one answered. Josef was pouring the sparkling red wine into the glasses, splashing it in till it overflowed and left dark pools on the wood. He beamed happily, as if all his cares had flown.

"Now let us drink to success," he said, raising his

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glass. "Success to each one of us, and a bumper harvest, the best we ever had!"

We clinked glasses and drank the toast. Josef drained his in one breath. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he refilled his glass then topped up the rest.

"Defeat to the invader!" he cried.

"Bravo, father!" said Emil.

Again we clinked glasses, Emil clinking his against mine so hard that I thought he had cracked it.

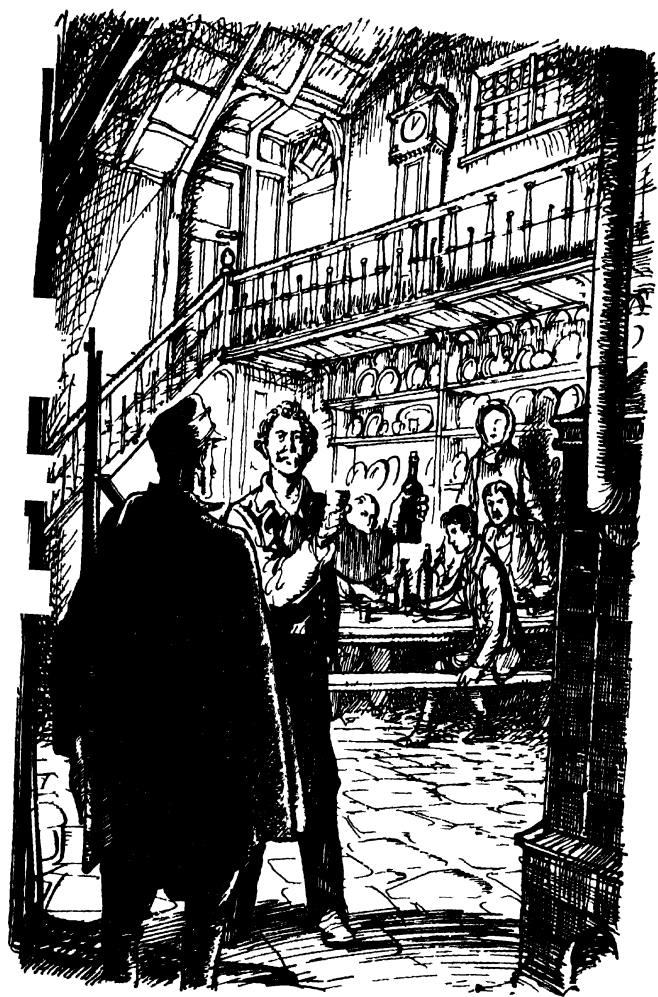
I had barely sipped mine when there was a loud rap on the door. We all laid our glasses down except Josef, who took his time over the drink, throwing his head back and pouring the wine slowly down his throat. Then, with his glass still in his hand, he strolled over to the door and opened it just far enough for him to see who it was.

"Come in, Sergeant de Kretser," he said, enthusiastically throwing the door wide open. "You've come just at the right moment. Don't tell me what for, I can guess it." He went to the table and with perfect composure picked up one of the bottles. "The best wine in Silvania," he said, "and you know it too. Mother, fetch the sergeant a glass."

De Kretser walked straight past him to the table. Glancing at each of us in turn, he fixed his eyes on Helpmann and asked curtly: "Who is this man?"

"I'm here to attend to a patient," said Helpmann steadily. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

"I'm the patient, Sergeant de Kretser," I said, hoping to divert his attention to myself. Helpmann spoke Silvanian with an accent almost as atrocious as de Kretser's. To anyone but a foreigner it would have been a complete give-away.



‘The best wine in Silvania’

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"I know all about you," said de Kretser, with an impatient wave of the hand. "You have been lying ill here for several days. But you have recovered and no one could say you were in need of a doctor now," and he added meaningly, " a *special* doctor who has come from as far afield as our friend here."

"That's my business," I said shortly. "He was sent for when I was delirious with fever and —"

"We are now celebrating his sensational recovery," said Josef. "Won't you join us, sergeant? You've never refused us yet. In Sylvania we always say: Never leave a glass full, never leave a glass empty." And he thrust a full glass right before de Kretser's nose.

I thought at first the sergeant was going to dash it to the ground. But he didn't. He seized it roughly and drank it straight off, without taking his eyes off Helpmann.

"Never leave a glass empty," said Josef, taking it from him and refilling it.

De Kretser asked several more questions, all quite obvious ones — what was his name, where was his practice, and so on — to all of which Helpmann replied with cool confidence. I couldn't help admiring the man, for he seemed to be quite fearless and so unconscious of his appalling accent that I found myself accepting it as natural. He was certainly pulling it off as far as de Kretser was concerned. The questions became less aggressive; the questioner sounded less like a fox waiting to pounce on his prey. I felt we should get away with it, provided he didn't take it into his head to ask for some proof of Helpmann's profession. I had some idea as to what was in the rucksack. But what was in Helpmann's case?

"You would enjoy your wine so much more if you

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would sit down to it, sergeant, like the rest of us," said Josef. He motioned to him to sit down next to his wife, filling his glass for the third time and setting it down on the table.

But de Kretser sat on the bench next to Helpmann. The case — a large attaché case in dark leather — was on the bench between them.

"Your wine, sergeant," said Helpmann, reaching across the table for his glass. "I'll just move this out of your way," he added, picking up the case in his left hand.

With a quick movement de Kretser's right hand closed over Helpmann's, pressing the case back to the bench.

"Why should you think it was in my way?" he asked, with a sneer. "Let it stay where it is."

He picked up his glass and sipped the wine slowly, glancing keenly at each one of us in turn. Emil didn't look up. He was drawing pictures with his finger in the spilt wine on the table. Josef had fetched a fresh bottle and was fumbling with the cork. I fancy I heard Madame Mendl catch her breath. Helpmann was the coolest of us. He seemed quite unconcerned and willing to submit patiently to anything de Kretser asked.

De Kretser waited till he had emptied his glass. Then he said, "I should like to inspect this case, doctor. Perhaps it will throw some light on your — your profession?"

His lips curled in a sneer as he spoke. He sounded as if he expected the contents of the case would show up Helpmann as a liar. The wily old fox! I wanted to pounce on him and knock his brains out before he had a chance of opening it, for I didn't doubt that to open it

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would be disastrous. From where I stood, behind his left shoulder, I could have been upon him before he saw me. But something in Helpmann's bearing held me back. He seemed quite unconcerned, almost as if he *wanted* de Kretser to open it, as if this were a move that he had himself planned.

"You have a search warrant no doubt?" said Helpmann sarcastically.

De Kretser took no notice. Lifting the case off the bench, he laid it down flat on the table, slipped the lock open, and pushed the lid back.

There was a breathless silence as he ran his fingers through the case, the grandfather's clock ticking ominously all the while. I took a step forward so that I could see the contents. I saw a stethoscope, some medical instruments and two bottles of medicine. It was in fact just what you'd expect a doctor to be carrying.

"You can turn the case inside out if you wish," said Helpmann. "But don't break the medicine bottles. My patient's appearance is deceptive. He's not as fit as he looks."

"I have seen all I want to, thank you," said de Kretser, replacing the instruments as he had found them. "I am perfectly satisfied."

"The examination is over," said Helpmann.

"I was a fool ever to suspect you, doctor," said de Kretser smoothly. "But you understand Silvania is riddled with spies and agents, thieves, murderers, who intend her overthrow. One must be wary. I am only a common soldier, but I have my duty to do." He sounded quite apologetic — or was it all pretence?

"There's nothing I like better than the sight of a good

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soldier doing his duty," said Josef, thrusting a fourth glass of wine into de Kretser's hands.

De Kretser refused it. Silvanian wine runs quickly to the head and blurs the mind in no time. De Kretser would not be drawn.

"It is time I left," he said, swinging his legs over the bench and getting up. "You country folk retire so early to bed. Look at the boy here, asleep already."

Emil had lolled forward onto the table, his head resting on his folded arms, his eyes closed. De Kretser playfully nudged his shoulder. Emil growled.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Madame Mendl," said the sergeant. "I shall not quickly forget your wine."

He fastened on his cloak, then turned to Helpmann and me.

"Gentlemen, I shall not forget you either. Thank you for making my task so — so easy. Adieu, and I trust we shall meet again."

He spoke the last words slowly and deliberately. Then, bowing with contemptuous politeness, he marched out, closing the door quietly behind him.



CHAPTER X

THE FIGHT IN THE DARK

MADAME MENDEL went upstairs to attend to our bedroom. She was giving us the room above the stable, the only other bedroom they had, not counting Emil's which was in the attic.

"Was the case your idea, Helpmann?" I asked.

"It was mine," said Emil, suddenly wide awake. "After we saw de Kretser below Valdec, I thought we'd better do something about it. So we called on the doctor and he lent us some old instruments of his. He'd just got back from town and he was glad to help."

"I'm going to bed," said Josef. "As for you, Emil —"

"We emptied Dr. Helpmann's case into my rucksack," said Emil.

"Bed for you, my boy," said Josef, half way up the stairs.

"Wait till you see what's in the rucksack," said Emil.

"I'm dying to," I said. "But it's not safe to look yet —"

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till we're quite certain de Kretser has quitted. Did you notice the way he looked at us when he was saying good-bye? He suspects us still, I'm sure of it. He may be lurking outside in the yard. I'm going out to see."

"BED!" thundered Josef.

"Coming, father!" said Emil. Then to me, "Go out the back way, Petr. Less danger of your being spotted."

He ran and opened the back door for me.

"May I have two minutes, father? It's terribly dark — I must guide Petr through the yard."

"Not a moment longer," said Josef, taking his watch out and leaning over the banisters. "If you're late, I fetch the strap."

"I'll be back in good time," said Emil.

"Don't open that rucksack till I come back," I told Helpmann.

Next moment I was following Emil quietly through the back door and into the yard.

It was pitch dark, for the moon had dropped behind a cloud. There was an eerie stillness in the air; not a stir in the wind, not a sound from the farmyard which all day long had been alive with the clucking and squawking of fowl. The only sound was the crunch of our footsteps in the gravel. I went on tiptoe — I think we both did — yet in the pin-drop silence the noise suggested an uneasy cart-horse or a platoon of heavy-footed infantry. If de Kretser were anywhere within a hundred yards of us, he must have heard.

At the far side of the yard there was a low stone wall. Here Emil left me, slinking quietly back into the house. He moved like a ghost, and I realized that the noise had been my fault.

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I stood still and listened intently for three or four minutes. Nothing was to be heard but the distant hoot of an owl in the wood below the farm. If de Kretser had left, he ought to be somewhere in that wood, for the road wound through it before zigzagging down the hillside to Valdec. Soon the moon would come out from behind the cloud and I should get a clear view of the road. Did I say soon? The cloud was only a small one, but it was moving terribly slowly.

I went on waiting. The darkness and the appalling stillness weighed heavily on me. I began to feel that the night was full of eyes, that I was being watched. Surely, if de Kretser had left the farm, I should have heard his footsteps on the road below by now? Was he still here, lurking in the shadows, watching me, waiting for me to fall into some trap?

Suddenly I heard a noise, a soft thud behind me. I whirled round in terror, stood still and tense with my fists clenched, expecting something to leap out upon me. But nothing happened — at least, nothing alarming. A light appeared at an upper window (for I was facing the house), dimly lighting up the still, ghostly branches of a pine tree outside. Perhaps a cone had fallen to the ground, thudding softly onto the pine needles below. I don't know if it was that. Anyway, I told myself that was what it was and breathed freely again.

Then the moon edged out of the cloud, flooding the valley with gentle, silver light. I looked towards the wood and the road below. Almost immediately I heard a voice, a man singing a foreign marching song. It came from below the wood . . . Yes, I could see him now, just emerging from the wood, a soldier wearing his military

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cloak and striding cheerfully down the road. Of course it must be de Kretser. He had taken a long time to get through the wood, but it must be him.

I waited till he was out of sight and I could hear him no longer. Then I made my way back towards the house and, leaning against the solid stone wall, stared over the dark blanket of pines and considered carefully. Although I had fulfilled my intention of seeing de Kretser clear of the place and knew that it was safe now for Helpmann and me to talk, for some reason or other I still felt uneasy. I walked twice round the house, trying the doors to see that they were locked, and examining the windows on the ground floor. All these were shuttered and fastened from the inside. The upper window where the light had appeared just now must be the bedroom Helpmann and I were to share, for it lay directly above one end of the stable. The stable was in two parts, one below the bedroom and the other extending beyond the end of the house, with its own low gable and loft. There were two doors, both of them locked as far as I could make out. As with most stable doors they were divided in two in the middle, so the upper part could be opened separately.

"What a fool you are for making all this fuss," I told myself. "De Kretser has gone. Go indoors to Helpmann. There's nobody eavesdropping, nothing to be scared of now."

I went inside, bolting the door top and bottom. Helpmann was alone in the kitchen, pouring himself a hot drink from a thermos flask.

"Cocoa," he said. "A special brew. I always carry it with me. Superlatively rich in fat content. Very soothing to the nerves. You try some?"

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He filled the lid of the thermos with the steaming liquid and handed it to me. I sipped it suspiciously. It tasted like very greasy dishwater.

"Don't spit it out. It does you good, soothes the nerves. You know, my friend, you're looking a bit shaky."

"Must be the cocoa," I said.

"Nonsense, it is a first rate tonic," he said fervently. "Perhaps if I tell you how I make it you feel differently about it. First of all you —"

At that moment Madame Mendl leaned over the banisters and called out that the room was ready.

"Better go upstairs and talk there," I said to Helpmann, glad of an opportunity to steer him off the cocoa. "We keep them all awake if we stay down here."

I carried his case for him — he wouldn't let me touch the rucksack or the precious thermos of cocoa which he insisted on carrying himself. We went straight upstairs, following Madame Mendl along the gallery to our room.

It was a biggish room with low rafters and a small square window, which, to judge from the musty atmosphere, had never been opened. A dim odour of horses and stale hay seeped up from the stable below. The light came from two candles on a chest of drawers, and I could see two low beds with their heads to the wall and a small table of plain scrubbed wood between. There was a built-in cupboard in one corner.

Madame Mendl wished us good night and went out, closing the door behind her.

"I was going to tell you about that cocoa," Helpmann began.

"Forget it," I said. "There's lots more important

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stuff to talk about than that. I want to see inside the rucksack. I want to hear how the boy found you. And I want to tell you about myself and why I've come for you."

"That boy's a genius," said Helpmann, laying the rucksack on one of the beds and untying the neck. "I was at the inn at Kennec and he fetched me. It was as simple as that. If he had come a day or two later, he wouldn't have found me there, for I'd made up my mind to go. The enemy are beginning to concentrate troops in the neighbourhood. More and more people come to the inn. I never stay long in one place, it is not safe."

"You didn't suspect a trap when Emil came?"

"Of course not. The innkeeper knows the family. Even if he hadn't, I should have trusted the boy. Such eyes he has, and such a way with him you can't resist him. He is a born leader, that boy. Ach, the cat's wheeskers! I just put myself in his hands and leave the rest to him."

"Was it his idea about borrowing the instruments from the doctor?"

"Oh yes, entirely," said Helpmann. "Instinct and a genius for details. That's what he's got. Now what do you make of this?"

This was nothing to do with Emil's instinct. It was something Helpmann had taken from the rucksack, a small bakelite tube about the size and shape of a tube of lipstick. He unscrewed the top and uncovered a glass cylinder some two and a half inches long.

"It's a radio set," he said, "a midget receiver. You can carry it behind your lapel." And he showed me the elastic bands to hold it sewn into his jacket. "Look, three

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compound metal valves the size of a pea, the circuit drawn in silver ink, resistances painted in carbon solution."

"Your invention?" I asked.

"Enemy secret," he whispered. "I steal it, don't ask me how. They do transmitters, too, only I wasn't quick enough to get one."

"As small as that?"

"Smaller. They fit into a button-hole."

He showed me next a small metal tube about the size of an ordinary electric torch. He called it a "pocket painkiller", explaining that it contained a glass ampoule filled with trilene, which is used for deadening pain. Anyone could use it without help. By tapping a plunger, the trilene is released in vapourized form and inhaled. You don't lose consciousness, but you feel no pain for at least an hour. Just the thing for a seriously wounded man.

There were plenty of other things in the rucksack — a wad of manuscript containing vital research notes, four or five notebooks tied together with indiarubber bands, small odds and ends of glass and metal mixed up with his shaving kit. Finally, divided into several portions and carefully wrapped in cotton wool, was a model of his latest Radar-beam camera. I watched him unwrap one of the portions, my heart pounding at my ribs with excitement. This was the treasure that Maclaren had sent me to find.

Helpmann laughed at me for being so excited. "Actually," he said, "the model is not so valuable. I can build another. The notebooks are *quite* irreplaceable. They contain data from experiments that Professor Libuslava and I did last year, and form the basis for the

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final calculations of focusing potentials and electrode design."

"And Libuslava?" I asked.

"He died in October. A brilliant mathematician. Ach, a great pity! He used his genius to solve practical problems in electron optics — that is a rare combination."

Helpmann sighed and thought for a moment.

"You see," he went on, "Libuslava worked very quick. Myself, I work till two in the morning regularly, writing up our experiments and trying to keep up with his ideas. With these notebooks and another six months' work, perhaps I see how he reached the conclusions we came to."

"And what do they say?" I broke in anxiously.

"They give me a start for the routine calculations." Helpmann smiled and pointed to the manuscript notes. "Ever since the professor's death I try to finish them. The electrode assembly is completely designed now. Tonight, if our candles are long enough, I begin on the correction-calculations for the potentials, in terms of the Libuslava Effect. Next I use the same equations, but in a modified form, to design the projector for the Blocking Beam. So, we are ready to go into production!"

I listened intently to his precise, clear voice as he went deeper into the basic theory of the Libuslava Effect and the results of their more crucial experiments. Then, when he seemed to pause, I took over and talked of my mission for Maclaren and our appeal for Helpmann's co-operation. Finally, as he beamed at the thought of continuing his calculations in peace, I told him of the secret place in the hills where the plane was to collect us and take us home, in four days' time.

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"Four days?" he said. "That is too soon, is it not?"

"It seemed long enough when we were planning it. I had almost a fortnight to find you. Maclaren left me a way out in case anything went wrong — an address from which a coded message could be sent to him to delay the plane."

Helpmann asked me where the secret landing ground was and how long it would take us to get there. I took out my map and showed him, tracing out our nearest route with a pencil.

"Ach, then we manage it easily. There's even time to remain another day if we want to," he said.

"Better clear out as soon as we can," I said. "We don't want to risk another visit from de Kretser."

I asked him then about his experiences during the war and how he had managed to get hold of enemy industrial secrets. He was reluctant to talk about the secrets now, but told me quite a lot about how the enemy had seized the university where he was working, of their contempt for learning, of how his friends had disappeared, of the reign of terror that resulted wherever they set foot. He was telling me of some of the sickening sights he had witnessed, when suddenly I caught hold of his arm and stopped him.

"Listen! Did you hear a noise?"

"No," he said slowly, after a pause. "Where was it?"

"Downstairs in the stable. Sounded like something soft falling on a heap of straw."

We listened in silence for a whole minute, hardly daring to breathe.

"It is the horses," said Helpmann in a low voice.

"They're at the far end," I said.

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We listened again, but heard no more. Nevertheless I had an uneasy feeling there *was* someone in the stable underneath.

"Have you a revolver, Helpmann?" I whispered. "I'm going to investigate."

"Yes, but what on earth —"

"Don't talk so loud. Let me have it."

He felt in the bottom of the rucksack and seemed puzzled not to find it there. He turned it inside out.

"That is strange," he said. "I'm sure I —"

"What about the case?"

He shook his head. I picked up the case and swiftly ran my hands through it, placing the medical instruments quietly on the bed. At the bottom, underneath everything else I found the revolver.

"That is very careless of me to leave it there," said Helpmann. "A good thing de Kretser didn't notice it."

Had de Kretser noticed it and, for some purpose of his own, kept silent? Well, there was no time to think that one out now. I wanted to find the quickest way down to the stable.

I had reached the door when I heard Helpmann wrench the cupboard door open with a harsh, grating sound. There was a sudden inrush of air which made the candles flicker and blew one of them out.

"I never thought it was a cupboard," he said.

I picked up the remaining candle and went over to him. I peered inside. It was a stairway, or rather something between a stairway and a fixed ladder, leading down to the stable below. I brushed past him and, with the candle held high above my head and the revolver in the other hand, I began to descend the stairs.

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They creaked at each step. I felt strung up and tense. It was like the nervous second between the race-starter's "Get set!" and the crack of the gun, but prolonged to an agony of strain.

Half way down, I stopped to take my bearings. At first I could see nothing but the dim outline of a long wooden grape wagon, which seemed to occupy the middle of the stable and whose shafts reached almost to the foot of the stair. Then, in the shadows beyond, I made out the main doorway and a smaller, divided one beside it. Round the walls there were untidy heaps of straw and at the foot of the stairs a pile of empty sacks.

I went down two more steps and then froze. Something *was* there. There was a sound — a quick breath, or a moving foot in the straw? I held my breath to listen. No sound came from the shadows, and I knew there was something else there also holding its breath and listening.

Suddenly there was a quick movement beyond the wagon. I was aware of the glint of my light on a steel barrel as I threw down the candle and dived for the pile of sacks. As I landed on the musty heap, the candle struck the floor and went out. At the same moment there came a spurt of flame from the straw, the angry crack of an automatic, and a splintering thud from the stair where I had been a second before.

The next few moments were confused. Above the clamour of the frightened horses, which were plunging to and fro in their boxes and whinnying fearfully, a distinct rustle of straw towards the door indicated my assailant's line of retreat. Firing twice over the sacks towards the door, I leapt up — only to receive a numbing blow on the shins that sent me sprawling on the dusty floor. I had

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forgotten the wagon shafts across my path, and as I fell the revolver went clattering onto the stone flags. There was no light to see it, no time to feel for it. My opponent had reached the small door and flung open the upper shutter. For a second I saw his head and shoulders silhouetted against the night sky. Then, coughing the dust out of my lungs, I picked myself up and launched out at him with all my might.

I caught his legs in a sort of rugby tackle and held on, my cheek pressed against his trousers. They reeked of strong tobacco, the tobacco which de Kretser always smoked. Of course I had guessed at once who my assailant was, but now I knew for certain. I knew also that he could kick like a mad horse. My ribs didn't like it.

I took a firmer grip of his knees and — to some extent — smothered his kicks. I shouted for Helpmann. I believe he shouted back, but I'm not sure. A light flashed and went out. A great fumbling and clattering on the stairs followed, and I heard Helpmann curse.

Then de Kretser changed his tactics. Instead of trying to wriggle free of my grip, he suddenly thrust with all his weight downwards. His nailed boots knocked the wind out of my stomach and crumpled me up. I lost my grip. I heard his legs thump against the lower half of the door and he hauled himself up and over.

He had got away.



CHAPTER XI

SOME GREASY COCOA AND A BRAINWAVE

I JERKED my head down between my legs and rolled over in the straw, groaning and fighting to get my breath back. If you've ever been winded yourself, you'll know what it feels like with your lungs pumped dry of air and your whole being striving to fill them up again. You can't do anything to hurry up the process. You just curl up like a hedgehog, lie still and wait. What an agonizing time it takes! But when at long last the breath seeps back, the relief is indescribable.

There wasn't much relief for me on this occasion. De Kretser had escaped. And he knew Helpmann's secret as well as mine.

I was struggling laboriously to my feet, when Helpmann came rushing into the stable from outside. He must have opened the lower half of the door and gone out while I was doubled up.

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"No good, my friend," he panted. "De Kretser has got away. Moon behind the clouds — can't see a damn thing. I say, are you all right?"

He helped me across the straw and up the stairs. There was a light at the top. When, after much stumbling and shuffling, we reached the bedroom again, I saw that the light was a candle and that Josef was holding it. He was standing there in his night-shirt, staring at us with wide, anxious eyes.

Never in my life have I felt such a worm as I felt then. In giving ourselves away we had also betrayed him, a man who had never wanted to mix himself up with our affairs, who had looked after me when I was ill and then had Helpmann thrust upon him. From now on the consequences for him, as one who had sheltered spies under his roof, were as grim as for us.

I felt too ashamed to say anything. Helpmann explained briefly what had happened in the stable, and I could tell from the way he spoke that he was as ashamed as I was.

Josef listened in silence. Then, without a word he got up, lit another candle and went down the stairs into the stable. Sitting on the beds, we heard the stairs creak as he went down, and the rustle of the straw as he walked across the floor. There was a long pause — he must have gone outside into the night — then we heard the sliding of bolts as he made fast the stable door, and again his step on the stair.

He emerged from the door at the stair head, holding the revolver I had dropped.

"Is this yours?" he said to Helpmann.

"Keep it," said Helpmann. "You need it now your-

SOME GREASY COCOA AND A BRAINWAVE self." Josef tossed it onto the bed beside Helpmann.

"I have rifles in the cellar, plenty of them," he said. "They belong to the Resistance. You look surprised, Petr Novak?"

I was mighty surprised and said so. Josef had not breathed a word of this to me. I had no idea he was connected with the Resistance.

"Nobody in the house knows, not even my wife." And he added drily, "I have learnt that it is wiser to keep one's mouth shut. So, one keeps others out of trouble."

His words stung me, and I felt more wretched than ever.

"Look here. About those rifles," said Helpmann. "De Kretser is sure to be back as soon as he can bring a patrol. Can't we hold them at bay from the house?"

"No ammunition," said Josef. "It's coming next week, the priest says. You see, we haven't had time to get going yet. If only you had come later, when we had had a chance to organize — ah, I might have helped you then. But you have come too soon." He broke off with a helpless shrug.

"Time will prove whether or not we've come too soon," I said. "Personally, I don't think we have. There's not a moment to be lost. We must plan right now. De Kretser will be back at dawn."

Oh yes, we made our plans all right, there and then as we sat on the beds in that draughty cold bedroom over the stable. And I told Josef that from now on I counted him and his family in our plans, and that I was as keen to save them as to fulfil the mission on which I had been sent.

He decided to take his family to a hiding-place in the

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hills, where, with reasonable luck, they ought to be safe for a while. The important thing was to get away before dawn, before de Kretser could bring his patrol.

As for Helpmann and myself, we discussed several possibilities. Helpmann suggested trying to get over the mountains into Tellyria, but Josef said we should never manage without a guide. "There's no escape that way," he said — which was exactly what Maclaren had told me. Personally, I was all for sticking to my original plan of making for the secret air rendezvous, where Maclaren's plane was to pick us up. De Kretser could not know where the place was, for I hadn't named it aloud to Helpmann — I had merely pointed it out to him on the map. We still had time to get there, if only we could get away from the farm unobserved. That was the problem — to give our enemies the slip. It meant descending the valley, passing right through them, for there was no other route.

"Ach, Peter, it is a problem this, a prob-lem," said Helpmann. "But I think I know the answer."

"Well?" I asked eagerly.

"Cocoa," he said, wagging a fat finger in my face. "Cocoa is the answer. It is a magic with the *drearest* of brains" (here he looked pointedly at me). "I go downstairs to the kitchen and make a brewing — presto!"

I could have thrown my boots at him. "What, that filthy pond scum?" I blurted out. "There's no time for —"

"Soothes the nerves, calms the brain, breeds ideas by the thousand" — he sounded just like a quack salesman. "Give me ten minutes, not a second more."

There was no stopping him. Not even my rude out-



"Soothes the nerves, calms the brain, breeds ideas
by the, thousand"

SOME GREASY COCOA AND A BRAINWAVE

burst could shake him. Helpmann is cocoa-mad. If all the mountains were to tumble into the valley and come hurtling down upon him, I believe he wouldn't be the least concerned provided he had his flask of cocoa.

With our lives in danger, I couldn't bear the thought of wasting ten minutes. So I spent them furiously tidying up, packing up our belongings in case and rucksack.

Helpmann was back before the ten minutes were up. I could smell his foul brew steaming up the stairs a good minute ahead of him. I'd decided I wouldn't touch the stuff, but when Josef drank off a whole glassful without falling down dead I changed my mind and took some. Only a sip, mind you.

It wasn't any better than the last lot, a shade more burnt if anything. But in fairness to Helpmann I must own that it was while I was sipping it that the idea occurred to me — the idea how to outwit de Kretser and his patrol.

The grape wagon was the clue to it, the one whose shafts I had tripped over in the stable. I had first noticed it two days before, when I had been rummaging round in the stables. It was in shape like an elongated wine barrel, some nine or ten feet long and four feet deep, mounted on a wooden chassis with the wheels and shafts of an ordinary farm wagon. Its chief use was at harvest time, for carrying the grapes from the terraces. They were tipped out of the hods through the hole in the top of the barrel. It had struck me that this hole was big enough for a man to squeeze through, and there was ample hiding place inside. If Helpmann and I could hide there, we could be taken down to the valley, right past the patrol.

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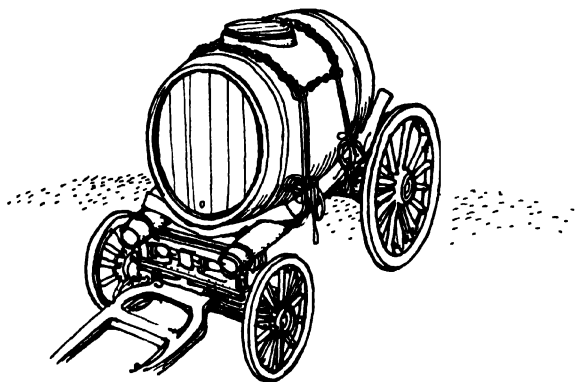
The risks to this plan were only too obvious. Josef didn't think much of it at first, and he thought still less when Emil asked to come with us—a request which earned him a determined “No!” as well as a cuff on the ear. But we had little choice. We were cornered like rats and time was against us. After some discussion several improvements were made on the original plan, Helpmann suggesting that we should take two wagons so as to confuse the patrol. In the end we decided to take three, the first two empty, and Helpmann and myself in the last. We had other safeguards as well, about which you shall hear in due course. Everything was planned with as much detail as possible in the time available.

While Emil kept watch on the road, the rest of us worked hard right through the night, packing up goods and chattels for the Mendls to take into the hills with them, loading the cart, preparing the grape wagons, drilling breathing holes in the one which was to hold us, fetching three carters from the chalets to escort the wagons, instructing them carefully and rehearsing them in the part they were to play. Never in my life had I worked with such feverish haste as I did that night, and even old Helpmann forgot to make a fresh brew of cocoa.

Before the first streaks of dawn had crept into the sky, everything was ready; we had said goodbye and wished each other luck. Lying on my face with Helpmann beside me in pitch darkness at the bottom of the musty grape wagon, I could hear the Mendls' cart rattling over the cobbled yard towards the hill path. Above the noise of the wheels I could hear the crying of the baby and the mother's voice trying to comfort her. I was sick

SOME GREASY COCOA AND A BRAINWAVE
at heart to think that I was the principal cause of their distress.

I gave the signal to the carter for us to start — a sharp bang on the side of the barrel. There was a rattle of harness and a grinding of wheels as the first wagon started, followed a moment later by the second, then — with a sickening lurch — by our own wagon. We were off.



CHAPTER XII

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE ROAD TO KOLENSO

WHAT a shaking we had as the iron-rimmed wheels bumped over the cobbles!

"Makes you f-feel like a b-bag of loose b-b-bones," said Hélpmann, as he fell in and out of my arms.

Fortunately it was smoother going when we reached the road, or I don't think we could have stood the journey for long. With the hole at the top of the barrel sealed, the atmosphere was pretty musty, and I was glad I had made the breathing holes a good size. Helpmann was more bothered than I was and kept wanting to sneeze. After several minutes of miserable snuffing and gasping, he drew a deep breath and sneezed with such violence that the carter took fright and stopped the wagon to see if we were suffocating.

"You'll have to try and hold it in, Helpmann," I said.

ON THE ROAD TO KOLENSO

"If the patrol's about, a sneeze like that isn't going to help us much."

Helpmann grunted. I don't think he was particularly worried. Nothing ever worried him, unless it was a threat to his blessed cocoa flask. Every time we went over a bump, he felt it anxiously to see if it had suffered any damage.

We must have been over half an hour on the road before three sharp raps on the outside of the barrel announced that the patrol had been sighted. Nothing more happened for several minutes. With one eye to my breathing hole, I watched the road slipping past underneath us — it was already quite light. I wished I could see more. How many men were there? Was de Kretser with them?

I had not long to wait for an answer. A moment later I heard the tramp of marching feet, smart and regular — Left, right! Left, right! I lay very quiet and listened to them as they came nearer, nearer still. There was a stifled gasp from Helpmann. Holy Moses, was he going to sneeze? Instinctively my hand groped for the back of his neck and roughly thrust his head down to his breathing hole.

The soldiers must have passed the first wagons by now. Now they must be level with us. Were they passing us too?

Left, right! Left, right! On and on they went, and the steady beat of marching feet faded into the distance. The patrol had left us unchallenged. It seemed too good to be true. I sighed with relief.

"Now, old man, you can sneeze the mountains down if you want to," I said.

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"Thanks," said Helpmann gratefully. "I don't want to at the moment, but you never know when it's going to take you. What about celebrating our deliverance with a drop of cocoa? There's a drop of last night's still left."

"No," I said.

A grunt from Helpmann. Then, a little later, "I'm going to — to sneeze. A-a-a-ti —"

That was as far as he got. Three quick raps on the outside of the wagon made him swallow the sneeze.

We must have come upon them unexpectedly as we swung round a bend, for the rapping sounded as we were lurching to one side. I heard men's voices; then, ringing out clearly above them, de Kretser's command to halt. With a jangle of harness and a chorus of "Woa-back, there!" we swayed to a standstill.

They searched the front two wagons first, and pretty thoroughly too, to judge from the time they took about it. Or was it just that the minutes were dragging with agonizing slowness as we lay in our dark, suffocating hiding place? I could hear de Kretser issuing his orders in that detestable high-pitched, staccato voice of his. And I could hear too some protests from his men. These I put down (rightly, as I learnt afterwards) to the stench which greeted them when the tops were removed from the barrels. For we had taken the precaution of scouring out the first two wagons with a strong solution of chloride of lime. (Mendl had a plentiful supply of this, which he used on the farm.) Anyone who has smelt it will know that it would be impossible to hide in a barrel saturated as these two were. The question was, would they search the third wagon as well?



They searched the front two wagons first

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"I don't think I can — aa-chaa — hold it in any long —" breathed Helpmann.

"You *must*," I whispered back. "I can hear them coming now. For God's sake hold it in."

De Kretser was questioning the carters. I couldn't hear what they said, but from the loudness of the voices I judged they must be standing between the second wagon and our own. Would the boys by some blunder give us away? I knew nothing about them. I had no idea whether they were quick or slow-witted. All I knew was that they were youngsters who worked for Josef.

The cross-examination ended and the footsteps and voices came towards us. My heart missed a beat as I heard someone bump roughly against the wheel. Poor Helpmann! He was in agony trying to stifle that sneeze. I could feel his shoulder jerking against mine as his whole body strove to hold it back, to smother it.

I pressed something into his mouth. It was a piece of chewing-gum, some that the dispatcher had given me before my jump. All the time that the carters were being questioned I had been searching my clothes to find it. It seemed to do the trick, for the shoulder-jerking stopped. I blessed the dispatcher.

But my relief was short-lived. Next moment de Kretser gave orders for our wagon to be searched.

There seemed to be some reluctance to obey the order and I lay in a cold sweat waiting for someone to attack the lid above us. The coughs and splutters that had followed the searching of the other wagons now increased, and de Kretser had to repeat the order before anyone moved.

The wagon trembled as two men -- or was it three? —

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mounted the wheels and hoisted themselves astride the barrel. There was a great banging and hammering at the lid. I had had it rammed down as tightly as possible, so that under cover of the noise needed to open it we could move to new positions, myself to the bottom end and Helpmann to the opposite. With a feeling of blank despair I sank to my knees and slithered past Helpmann in the dark. If either of us had stumbled I doubt if we should have been heard, such was the pandemonium of banging above our heads.

Gradually the lid began to yield. I saw a crack of daylight between lid and rim, thin as a pencil line.

I took out my revolver and slipped back the safety catch.

The banging ceased abruptly and I heard the excited chatter of voices again . . . something about a signal on the hill. Someone shouted at the top of his voice. Then silence, and in the distance an answering call, higher up on the hill.

Again the confused babble of voices, de Kretser barking out an order that I didn't catch, and the scuffle of feet on the road. What on earth was happening? Were they after all going to move off and leave us undisturbed? It certainly sounded as if some of the patrol were continuing the march.

Then the banging started up again, drowning voices, marching feet, everything else. A final wrench and the lid was off, slithering down the side and landing with a clatter in the road.

The circle of light where the lid had been made me blink. Crouching low, deep in shadow and as far away from the light as I could wriggle, I pointed my revolver at

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the sky and waited. I couldn't see Helpmann, nor could he see me. He told me afterwards that he had his knife in a packet of chloride of lime, ready to rip it open and scatter it as soon as the searcher dropped in.

In the tension of those terrible moments I remember hearing the tramp of marching feet growing fainter, then de Kretser's voice shouting at the soldier who had wrenched off the lid: "Well, Private Garz, what are you waiting for? Hurry up. We must follow the others. Hurry, I tell you."

The circle of light darkened. I expected to see a pair of legs dangling down.

But they never came. Instead the light appeared again and I heard the soldier call back to de Kretser, "I tell you, sergeant, there's nobody there. Look!"

Something plunged down through the hole, striking the bottom with a thud. It was a rifle, with a bayonet fixed on the muzzle. If we had remained lying down instead of moving, we should have been nicely skewered to the floor.

Next moment a pair of hands appeared through the hole, seized the butt and tore the rifle free of the wood, but not clear of the barrel. The point of the bayonet swung towards me, jabbing into the darkness and grazing my coat. I dropped to the floor and curled into a ball. Just as well I did, for I heard the bayonet splinter the wood, probably the end of the barrel where I had been leaning. The skirmishing was then transferred to Helpmann's end, where he was lying on his back on the floor in a sort of half moon, with his legs against the side, pointing upwards — not that I knew anything about this until afterwards, for I never budged an inch till it was all

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over. I just went on lying there, with my hands clasped behind my neck, my elbows pressed together, in a paralysis of fear. After what seemed an eternity I heard the crack of the carter's whip, and suddenly we were on the move again, jogging down the dusty road to Valdec, the carter singing a merry tune as we went.

I waited for the raps on the barrel which were to signal the all clear. Then I uncurled myself and looked up.

The light was pouring through the hole. Nobody had bothered to replace the lid.



CHAPTER XIII

LETTING THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

WE left the wagon as soon as we dared, on a tree-screened stretch of road below Valdec, tipping the three carters with what money we could spare — not, I'm afraid, as handsomely as they deserved. So as to avoid suspicion they decided to continue slowly down the road on the way to Kolenso, where repairs were to be made to the wagons in readiness for the harvest. First they showed us a short cut through the woods. By taking this we were able to avoid a long and dull loop in the road, which we rejoined not far from the torrent. We meant now to stick to the road and pick up lifts if we could.

If you had met us as we strode down that dusty road, you would hardly have believed us to be "wanted men" — perhaps the two most wanted men in Silvania. You would have seen only two ordinary highland peasants, dressed in the rough working clothes which we had been given

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by Josef. Helpmann wore a black cotton half-smock, which fitted loosely at the neck and showed a collarless shirt underneath. His hat was so antiquated that it might have belonged to Julius Caesar, and he carried a much-battered suitcase containing the sort of things a man who had been turned out of his home would carry. That was to be our story if we were questioned — we had been turned out to provide soldiers' billets. My own outfit was a bit different; I wore a jacket instead of a smock, a scarf round the neck, and a ragged tweed cap; and I carried a bundle over one shoulder and a string bag in my hand. The bundle, which we thought to be less likely than the suitcase to arouse suspicion, concealed Helpmann's treasures, the model of the camera and the manuscript notes, and of course the precious cocoa flask — all wrapped up in overalls.

My knowledge of the language marked me out as the one to do the talking. Helpmann, who spoke it badly, could only stutter — or rather, that was to be his pretence.

Nothing passed us on the road, for it was early yet. But we came across an abandoned "Yug" lorry, perhaps one that de Kretser had used.

Soon after seven o'clock we sighted an autogyro flying at about a thousand feet, up-valley.

"Enemy plane," said Helpmann. "Plenty of them about these last few weeks. Reconnaissance work, you know."

"I expect he's looking for us," I said. "Look. He's losing height."

The autogyro was a good mile or more past us when it banked steeply to the right, then proceeded on its course

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in a series of broad, sweeping curves that reached from one side of the valley to the other.

"Hmm," grunted Helpmann. "They're after us all right, no doubt about it. Making a thorough job of it too. I'm thankful we did not try the mountains."

"I'm afraid we've disappointed them there," I said.

At Kolenso, a big village at the junction of the East Radra valley, we called at the doctor's house. A plump, jovial man with a bushy moustache, he was having breakfast in his pyjamas and insisted on our joining him. After we had told him of our escape, he gave us the latest news of the war — of fresh enemy concentrations in the south, of further infiltrations from east and south, of roads blocked with refugees. It was a gloomy story. His only cheerful news was of an allied success on the northern front, and a rumour — no more than a rumour as yet — that Tellyria was about to throw in her lot with the allies.

We didn't stay long at the doctor's, but hurried on south, mostly on foot, though we begged lifts where we could. Owing to the petrol shortage there was hardly any motor traffic on the road, and we had to be content with the dawdling progress of a horse and cart or a pony trap. We passed through straggling villages, many of them startlingly unattractive, with little boxy wooden houses roofed with corrugated iron, wretched and unhomely.

In the late afternoon we passed a gipsy encampment, and I remember the bright bracelets and gaily coloured bandeaux that the women wore as they sat round their wood fire. The further south we went the more people we saw, many of them refugees, strangers like ourselves, driven

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from God knows where, with their bags and sacks and cases and their sad bewildered faces. We saw no more of the autogvros that day. Our only sight of the enemy was of two truckloads of soldiers hurtling at a dangerous speed through a small village, trailing a great cloud of dust behind them.

We spent the night in a barn lying in a bed of hay. Here, in spite of the insects that attacked us and set me scratching for the next twenty-four hours, we slept soundly till morning. Anyway, we both preferred the fleas to the farmer who found us there next morning. Never have I had to stand up to such a hurricane of abuse as he let loose on us.

Afternoon found us at the village of Karadov, three kilometres from the railway at Riok and the main valley for which we were aiming. The village was overrun with people — strangers and refugees, ragged, hungry and pitiful to look at. At the inn there was nothing for them to eat, for they had no money, and I saw many being turned away. I had to open my purse before the innkeeper would admit us and give us food. Having had no breakfast and no supper the previous night, we were pretty ravenous.

"Come on, Helpmann," I said. "There's an empty table over there."

Two cats and two kittens were sitting on the table top, licking up the crumbs. I wanted to shoo them away, but Helpmann wouldn't let me.

"Whatever do you do, Peter? Black cats, they bring luck. Let them stay."

And there they stayed all through the meal, the mother cat (she had an ugly sore on her back) purring and curling

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up against Helpmann's shoulder, while dad and the two kittens tried to raid my plate when they thought I wasn't looking.

"So you're superstitious," I said.

"Yes, about cats."

He dipped a finger of bread into his soup and fed the mother with it.

I'm not superstitious myself. I twitted him for wasting good food on cats when there were people outside twice as hungry.

But he laughed and said, "Peter, my friend, it is fool-ish to despise a black cat. Always he brings luck. Al-ways."

How right he proved to be!

For the time being I took no notice of them. The conversation at the next table was more engrossing. A small man with tired eyes and an unshaven chin was talking.

"Searched everything, they did. Emptied my case, spilt it into the road. The swine won't let a soul pass without first pulling him to bits. Been at it all day —"

"And last night as well," said the woman opposite. "They caught Francis just after midnight. Three revolvers in his rucksack. You heard what happened to him?" She told him, in a hushed voice, and I didn't hear what it was. But the expression on the listener's face told me all I needed to know.

"Another road patrol," I whispered to Helpmann. "Stopping everyone."

"Ach, seems they're on our trail already."

"Maybe they're after the Resistance," I said.

I went over to the man to try to get into conversation

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with him. I could tell from his patois that he wasn't a refugee, that he belonged to these parts. Perhaps he was a member of the Resistance. Anyway I hoped he would be able to help us. I asked him which road it was that was blocked. But he shrank from me with wide, suspicious eyes, and refused to tell me.

"I don't know you," he said shortly. "These days it's only a fool who opens his mouth to a stranger."

I went outside to see if I could see any signs of the patrol, pushing my way through the crowd. Following the road round the bend, I soon came suddenly upon them — three soldiers with fixed bayonets, and an officer inspecting passes. They had thrown a wooden barrier across the road, on the far side of which a crowd had assembled. The patrol were too occupied to notice me, and I slipped down a side-street to see if there was any way of avoiding them. The street was blocked further down with sandbags and barbed wire. There was a sentry sitting on the sandbags. I tried another side-street, one which led down to the river. But the bridge was guarded. It was the same everywhere. Every exit was watched. It was clear that we should either have to run the gauntlet of the patrol or turn back the way we had come.

I returned in low spirits to the inn to find Helpmann and the innkeeper busy talking cats. The innkeeper was holding the parents in his arms, while the two kittens were perched precariously on Helpmann's shoulders.

"A precious treasure they are," the innkeeper was saying. "You will not stroke her, no?" (This was addressed to me, as he handed me the one with the sore.) "She is very gentle, and affectionate too — she will not

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leave the house. Follows me everywhere. And where she goes the little ones follow, eh?"

I took Helpmann aside and told him what I had seen.

"Trapped, eh? It's like that, is it?" he said in his slow drawling way. And sitting down at the table, he gently lifted the two kittens down from his shoulders.

"We can't stay here, and we can't turn back. We've got to break through somehow. How are we going to do it?"

"Well, Peter, we must think of some-thing — eh, pussy?" he said, absent-mindedly stroking the kittens, his thoughts miles away.

He went on like that for a good two minutes. Then suddenly, "The bundle — where is it, Peter?" he said.

I picked it up from under the table.

"Ah, that's what we want," he said. "Hand it over."

"Is it the damned cocoa flask you're after? I hope to God you're not —"

"Cocoa?" he said. "Not cocoa — cats! This is where the cats come in."

"What?"

"Listen, Peter. You say the road's blocked?"

I nodded.

"And the patrol is searching everything?"

"We haven't a hope of getting away with that bundle."

"Well, they can turn the suitcase inside out and upside down if they want to, and they won't find what they're looking for."

"Of course they won't," I broke in impatiently, for I couldn't for the life of me see what he was getting at.

"But what will happen when they open the bundle and find all your notes and the map and —"

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"They won't find them, Peter. You'll see they don't, won't you, pussy?" He took hold of the lapel of my jacket and leaned towards me. "Now listen to me. You heard the innkeeper say how affectionate the cats were, yes? That they follow him around everywhere? Well, we can *fix* that patrol like this — "

And, lowering his voice, he told me the plan. It was a clever plan, but a desperate one. We decided to act on it.

Five minutes later we left the inn. Threading our way through the crowd outside, we followed the road round till we came to the patrol. I was in front with the suitcase. Helpmann had the bundle.

We seemed to be the only people going south. The lieutenant was so busy with the queue of refugees pressing in from the other side of the barrier that it was some minutes before we were noticed. I stood as patiently as I could all this time — and what an endless time it seemed! — but my head was in a whirl and I didn't take in all that was happening.

Suddenly, "Open it!" a gruff voice ordered, and I realized with a start that the lieutenant was pointing to my suitcase. I obeyed with trembling fingers. One of the guards pounced on it and ran swiftly through the contents.

After pulling my pockets inside out and feeling me all over, he turned his attention to Helpmann.

"What's in that bundle?" he barked.

"Nothing that m-m-matters," said Helpmann. And when the soldier ordered him to undo the knot, with a pretence of great agitation he refused.

At this point I intervened.

LETTING THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

"My friend has two cats inside the bundle. They're very nervous cats. If he undoes the bundle they'll run away, and we'll have an awful job to catch them again. It would be stupid to undo it. Please —"

"You heard my command," said the soldier, pointing his bayonet at Helpmann.

This was just what we wanted to happen. But from Helpmann's melancholy face and the reluctant way he fumbled at the knot, you would have thought that he was trying to hide some deadly secret.

It was hardly undone when the bundle burst open. Out jumped the innkeeper's two cats and scampered away in a fine panic.

"Oh!" groaned Helpmann at the top of his voice, and he made a grab at one of the cats — and missed.

"There, what did I tell you?" I cried angrily. And dropping my case with as much commotion as possible, I dived after the other one. Of course I missed too — that was the idea.

The success of our plan depended now on the two cats making for the inn. This they did, with Helpmann and myself tearing headlong after them, to make sure they didn't change their minds. If they had chosen to go the other way, beyond the barrier, we should have lost them — and dished our only chance of escape. But, luckily for us, they made for home.

In less than a minute we were in the innkeeper's private room doing up the bundle all over again — not with the cats inside this time, but with Helpmann's precious treasures, the notes, the map and the compass, the thermos flask, all of which we had left meanwhile in charge of the innkeeper, trusting in his good faith.

THERE'S NO ESCAPE

The good fellow seemed as pleased with our success as we were. As we were leaving, I thanked him with all my heart for his help and tried to press some money into his hand. But he wouldn't touch it.

Another minute and we were back at the road barrier. There was still quite a crowd there.

"Look, it's the old gaffer with the cats!" someone shouted out.

Breathless and triumphant, Helpmann held up the bundle in the air, while I hastily picked up the suitcase. We were drawing too much attention, and I was anxious to get on.

"Cats, eh? Let's hear 'em squeak!" cried an old man, and he tried to poke the bundle with his stick. But Helpmann swung it neatly out of range.

"Steady on! You'll make 'em seasick if you swing 'em about like that," said another voice, and everybody — even the soldiers — laughed.

"I want to hear 'em SQUEAK!" cried the old man, lunging out again with his stick.

I caught him by the collar and pulled him roughly back. Then impatiently I asked the soldier who had examined us to let us pass.

He was busy examining someone else. But he looked up, glancing first at the bundle, then at the old man.

"You want to hear 'em squeak, do you, grandpa?" he said, with a cruel glint in his eye. "Well, what if I give 'em a good hearty pinch? Would that answer?"

He strode over to Helpmann.

I thought that was the end. I looked helplessly at Helpmann, hoping he would think of some way of saving us.

LETTING THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

But it wasn't Helpmann who saved us. It was the lieutenant.

"Get back to your job!" he ordered the soldier curtly. "We've enough on our hands without stopping to play the giddy fool. Let them go."

He spoke just in the nick of time. With a sour grin the soldier obeyed. The hand that had all but touched the precious bundle lifted the barrier instead and let us pass.

We were well past the village before either of us spoke.

"Whew! I thought we'd had it that time," I said, mopping the sweat from my brow. "If it hadn't been for that lieutenant —"

"Nonsense, Peter my friend. It was nothing to do with the lieutenant. It was the cats that saved us. Black cats always bring luck. Al-ways."



CHAPTER XIV

WHERE'S THE BUNDLE?

WE walked at a brisk pace, very bucked with our latest success. The road was a good deal less crowded than we had expected. Except for a few stragglers, the trickle of refugees had dried up, while the few people we overtook going our way were all Silvanians. As the valley was getting narrower and the country on either side was steep and wooded, we kept to the road most of the time. Once, when we heard the drone of a plane, we made a dash for the trees. It was the autogyro returning.

"I guess she's tired of looking for us," said Helpmann, as she sped overhead. "Seems in a hurry to get back to base, and she's not as low as she was yesterday."

We were a good hundred yards from the road and well hidden, so I took the opportunity to glance at the map and check up on our position. We reckoned that we

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ought to reach Riok, the railway junction where our valley joined the main valley, by early evening; and with luck catch a train going west. The actual distance from Riok to the secret landing ground where the plane was to pick us up was not far — barely forty-five kilometres. One could almost have walked the distance in a day, and we had over thirty hours to get there, the plane being due at dawn. That gave us plenty of time, even allowing for mishaps.

I turned the map over and looked at the diagram that Maclaren had drawn on the linen back. It showed the intricate approach to the landing ground, marking paths and landmarks to guide us, copied exactly from the micro-film, with only the place names disguised. I must have looked at it a hundred times.

"Why don't you throw the map away?" said Helpmann. "You must know the route backwards by now. If we're seen with it, my friend, then there is trouble for us."

"I'm keeping it," I said. "We might be forced off the route."

"But the markings — they might betray us."

"If we're in a tight corner, I can smudge them out. They're written with a special pencil."

I put it away in the pocket of my jacket, where I could reach it quickly.

While we were in the wood, a truckload of enemy soldiers swept down the road at a terrific speed, a great cloud of dust billowing out behind them. They were heading south, the same way as we were. We lay doggo for a good half-hour, but no more trucks followed. So we returned to the road and continued our journey,

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trusting we should get some warning of any further surprises. Who were these soldiers? A detachment from Karadov, or de Kretser's patrol?

We reached Riok at dusk and made straight for the railway station. Being right in the centre of the town, it was not difficult to find. The streets were crowded with refugees, many of whom stopped us and begged for help. We were sorry for their wretched plight, sorrier still that we could do nothing for them. The last fifty yards to the station were so crowded that we had to push and barge our way through. I managed to get hold of a newspaper from a small boy — the first paper I had seen since my arrival in Sylvania. There was only one page and it was splashed with headlines about new enemy infiltrations from the south and the mad inrush of refugees. No news of the allies' successes. But from the chattering, excited crowd I heard rumours in plenty: rumours of an enemy reverse on the coast, of the start of the long-awaited allied offensive in the north, and — most thrilling of all — rumours that Tellyria was on the brink of joining the European Pact and throwing in her lot with the allies. This, if it were true, was great news. It could not fail to hasten Sylvania's day of liberation.

In the station there was complete chaos. The train service was disorganized, we could find no officials to help us, and nobody knew what was happening. There appeared to be no way of buying tickets, for a board had been nailed over the booking window. The only thing to do was to wait on the platform till a train arrived and then jump on if there was any room. But would there be room? My heart sank when I saw the near platform, packed solid with humanity, standing, sitting, lying,

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sprawling, or drifting aimlessly up and down the line. Here was all the congestion and misery of war. There were babies howling, men and women shouting and bickering; many silent with exhaustion and despair, while a few were asleep, stretched out at full length, their heads propped against a battered suitcase or a dusty bundle of bedding. I stumbled against the feet of one of these sleepers, but he never stirred.

Then a train came in, slowly and drearily, dragging its interminable carriages through the station. It never stopped, for it already carried three times as many passengers as it was built for. They stuffed the corridors, hung out of the windows, stood on the running boards, lay on the roof clinging like limpets. A few climbed through the windows and dropped off on to the platform, while one or two hopefuls standing near us jumped on to the running boards and were carried along out of the station. I don't suppose they knew or cared much where they were going.

"Depressing sight, isn't it?" said Helpmann. "Worse than anything I have seen last week, indeed it is."

"Come on. Over the footbridge," I said. "It's the other platform we want."

"Why not cross the line? It's quicker," said Helpmann.

"It means exposing ourselves," I said.

"Only for a second or two. Why bother to — ?"

"That's why," I said, pointing to the far end of the platform where three enemy soldiers were standing in a group talking. "They're not the first I've seen in Riok. They say there's a company billeted here."

So we used the footbridge. Both stairway and bridge

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were crowded, but this was to our advantage and we had enough room to squeeze by.

From the bridge we could see down into the town on either side of the line.

While we were threading our way along it we were pulled up suddenly by the long, shrill blast of a whistle. It came from the yard on the far side. Two enemy trucks were drawn up against the kerb.

Immediately a dozen or more soldiers, armed with rifles, dismounted from one of the trucks and fell-in in two ranks, while the crowd dropped back.

Another soldier was crossing the yard towards them, an officer.

"Peter my boy, who is that fellow?" said Helpmann. "The officer, I mean. Haven't we seen him before?"

I pushed in front of an old woman, craned past someone else's neck and looked. At first I couldn't see him clearly, for the evening light was none too good. But by the time he had reached his squad, I had recognized him. It was the lieutenant from the road patrol at Karadov.

The soldiers from the other truck had by now dismounted. One of them, an N.C.O., went up to the officer, saluted and started to talk.

"Do you recognize him? Was he one of the patrol?" said Helpmann.

"Can't say. He's got his back to us."

"I think he must be. There's something familiar about him. Something about the way he walks."

"We didn't see any of them walk. *Must* you expose yourself like that?" I pulled him back, for he was leaning right out from the bridge and over the line.



On the bridge at Riok

WHERE'S THE BUNDLE?

He was quite annoyed with me — I was going to say angry, but angry is too strong a word for Helpmann. I never saw him do more than smoulder. "The blighter turned round just as you tugged, and I miss him. Imbecile, im-be-cile! I'm sure I could have told you who it was."

"What does it matter?" I said impatiently. "They're going to search the station. We must get away from here — double quick. Into the town. Mix with the crowd. Anywhere but here."

"I think it was —" began Helpmann.

But I didn't wait to hear. "This way!" I said, and, half-doubled up, with my head well below the parapet, I began to run back along the crowded bridge, dodging a man here, jumping a bale there, and colliding more than once.

Helpmann grabbed hold of my wrist. "I think it was de Kretser," he said.

I was afraid that was what he wanted to tell me, but I didn't want to hear it. Well, we had managed to throw him off for forty-eight hours already. Perhaps that was as long as we could reasonably hope for.

Having heard the name, I couldn't resist the temptation of looking to see, and for a fleeting instant I peered over the parapet. But I was too late. The yard was empty of soldiers. I knew now they must have started to search the station. Only a miracle could save us now.

"They're crossing the line. Three — no, four of them running across," said Helpmann. He was standing upright, head and shoulders exposed for anyone to pot at.

"Keep your head down," I snapped. Really, it was crazy the way he kept making a target of himself. "Look,

THERE'S NO ESCAPE

I'm leaving the suitcase here. We don't need it, and we can move a lot quicker without it. Shall I take the bundle from you?"

"No. I'll hang on to it."

At the top of the steps I stopped. Peering down over the bobbing heads, I could see the whole length of the platform. Three soldiers were advancing down to the far end. Three others were approaching the bridge, searching faces and features as they went. People slunk from them or turned their faces away — all of which delayed the soldiers — but they were too near to the bridge and too thorough in their search for us to have a chance of slipping past unnoticed.

Just as they reached the bridge, the whistle sounded again — from the other platform, I believe. The soldiers halted, turned round, and then, in obedience to a signal I couldn't see, they split company, two continuing up the platform and out of sight, while the other remained at the foot of the bridge.

"It's no good, Helpmann," I said. "Not a hope of our getting past. He's examining everyone as they come down."

"I'll try the other side."

"All right. Give me a signal if the coast is clear. And *keep your head down.*"

He was gone before I had finished speaking.

Meanwhile I did what I could to disguise myself, pulling my cap over my eyes, and dirtying my face. Only a few of the soldiers had seen us, and the rest must be relying on what they had been told. With luck it might be possible to —

Suddenly a shot rang out. There was a shout from the

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other end of the bridge, and everyone turned round to see what had happened. Had Helpmann been spotted? Had he been hit?

I flung myself into the scrum, a thrusting, excited one-way traffic pressing over the bridge and shouting hysterically. Somewhere near the middle, the scrum wedged itself solid between the walls of the bridge. I pushed and squeezed and yelled but could get no further. I looked wildly among the sea of faces for Helpmann. There was a massive, curly-headed negro in front of me, and I hauled myself half way to his shoulders to get a better view.

Still no sign of Helpmann.

But I saw the soldiers, two of them emerging from the steps, shouting for order at the top of their voices. One of them was the lieutenant. The negro shook me off before I could get a proper look at the other.

The events of the next few minutes were so confused that I find it difficult to recall them clearly. The first thing I remember was the sight of a bruised and battered figure crawling through the negro's legs and seizing me round the middle. I was wondering whether to push him back where he came from when I saw who it was.

"Ach, Peter my friend," he gasped. "The bundle — I have dropped it."

"Where did you drop it?"

"I don't know."

"Are you hurt?"

"A splinter in my cheek, nothing worse. The bullet missed me."

I hauled him like a sack of potatoes to his feet. Except for a bleeding cheek and a grimy forehead, he looked

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none the worse for being shot at and trampled underfoot.

"I must get that bundle back, I must, I must!"

The next two things happened at the same time. I saw the lieutenant again — he was in the thick of the scrum now, a bare ten feet away from me — and for a second I caught his eye. At the same moment I heard another whistle, louder, intenser, more prolonged than the last, and from a different direction.

"D'you hear that?" said Helpmann.

"God! They're on us from both sides now."

"It's a train!" said Helpmann. "A train whistle."

I looked up the line and saw he was right. A goods train was chugging round the bend and in less than a minute it would be passing underneath us.

"Stand aside there!" yelled the lieutenant above the din. "Stand aside or I'll shoot!"

I heard him in a vacant, almost meditative way with only half my attention. My brain was racing as the train approached steadily. In a second I had gauged the speed, the drop from the bridge, the minimum time we should be exposed as we clambered over the bridge parapet, the chance of falling between two trucks and being sliced between wheels and rail.

I pressed my lips against Helpmann's ear.

"We must jump that train, jump it from the bridge," I said.

"What about the bundle? We can't leave the bundle. I —"

"It must be on the ground somewhere. And we've —" I glanced once more at the approaching train — "we've about twenty seconds to find it."

I ducked and searched desperately but unsuccessfully

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among the legs and feet and baggage till I had counted ten. Then calling to Helpmann, who had disappeared, to follow, I clambered up the side of the criss-cross iron parapet and slithered over the side. With my right arm I reached down to grip one of the bars, at the same time trying to hook my leg in another. A hand grasped at my clothing and tried to haul me back. A voice from the bridge shouting, "Thief!" rang out clear of all the clamour. There were two or three shots from the platform. A bullet snicked my ear. Then louder and louder, swallowing all other noise in its chugging and roaring and the whistle's high-pitched, continuous screech — the train!

As I hung on breathlessly, out of the corner of my eye I saw several stragglers scatter from the line. Next moment a hot blast of smoke and a great whirl of sparks from below nearly blew me from my perch. The noise of the engine was deafening, and the smoke half-choked my lungs. Still clinging with my hands, I let my legs dangle and peered down through the smoke with smarting eyes.

Through gaps in the dispersing eddies of smoke and steam the outlines of the swaying trucks became visible. With a great effort of will I waited until a gap between them was just below me, and let go. . . .



CHAPTER XV

THE RED SIGNAL

As I had reckoned, the next truck slid quickly below me as I dropped, and a moment later I had glanced off the black and white flank of a Friesian heifer and landed in a heap of straw. There were six of them packed horns to tail in the cattle-truck I had unwittingly chosen. They sheered nervously away from my corner for a minute or two, but soon found me harmless enough and after a time ignored me completely.

I said I landed on straw. It would be more accurate to say I landed on a fifty-fifty mixture of straw and cow-dung. I was plastered very liberally with the stuff, and the stench clung to me for days afterwards. However, I was unhurt. I might have landed in one of the coal or timber trucks, which would hardly have been an improvement.

I let a mile or two slide between me and the station before sorting myself out. My first discovery was that I had left my jacket behind when I dropped, and with it

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the map on which the intricate route to the secret landing ground was marked. It was indeed a bitter discovery. From now on we had only my memory to guide us over country which neither of us had ever seen before. I might even have to make the journey alone, for I didn't yet know if Helpmann had followed me or not. And what about the bundle? Had he found it?

I stood up and looked down the line of trucks clanking away into the half-darkness behind me. The first three were cattle trucks. The next was stacked high with timber, and I could not see beyond. I wondered if it would be possible for me to climb from truck to truck and search for Helpmann. But the train was travelling at a fair pace, and when I glanced at the couplings and measured up the gap between my truck and the next, I soon saw that this would be a perilous undertaking.

After ten or twelve miles a red signal stopped the train and I lost no time in clambering over the side and down onto the track. Ahead of us gleamed the lights of a signal box and of a village not far beyond. I set about searching as many trucks as possible before we re-started.

In the first six there was no sign of either Helpmann or his bundle. The seventh was empty but for a tarpaulin draped loosely over one corner. I was just going to leave it and hurry on to the next before the train started, when something about the shape of the tarpaulin made me change my mind. I walked over to it and was about to turn the end up when I was seized violently round the ankles and thrown off my balance. The next moment I was pinioned to the bottom of the truck, with two bony knees digging into my arms, a powerful grip on my throat and my head pressed hard into the coal dust.

THERE'S NO ESCAPE

I thought at first that my assailant must be a soldier who had jumped the train at Riok and waited his chance to catch me. But I soon saw that this ragged creature with the fanatical eyes was no soldier.

"Let go!" I gasped. "Let go!"

Seeing that I made no attempt to struggle, he gradually loosened his grip on my throat and let me speak.

"It's all right, I'm not interfering with you," I said. "You've jumped the train same as I have. Trying to get away from the enemy, aren't you? Well, I'm looking for my friend. Did you see anyone jump from the bridge at —"

"No understand."

"Sprechen Sie Deutsch?"

He nodded, and I stumbled out my questions in bad German. At that he let me get up.

He apologized for knocking me down, told me he had been running from the enemy across two countries, that other Jews had suffered as he had, lost their homes and their property, etc. etc. I should have had all his life story had I not cut him short and repeated my question: had he seen anyone jump from the bridge at Riok?

He said no.

"Did you see a bundle thrown from the bridge?"

He paused a moment, averting his eyes, then replied, "I was under the tarpaulin and saw nothing."

I turned to go, but he caught me by the arm and begged me for something to eat, as he had had no food for two days.

I told him I had none with me and clambered over the side of the truck to continue my search.

The signal was still red. I noticed the door of the

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signal box open. For an instant a man was silhouetted against the light. Then, closing the door behind him, he came down the steps, his lantern bobbing up and down as he walked along the track. What did it mean?

I didn't wait to see but hurried on with my search.

I found Helpmann four trucks along — or rather, he found me. He was leaning over the side resting on his armpits, his arms hanging down limply in front of him; a seasick traveller.

"It is you, Peter?" he mumbled. "Thank goodness I find you."

I ran up and took his hand. "Are you all right? You're looking awfully groggy."

"I banged my head when I fell. Poof — so!"

I climbed up beside him. It scared me to see him so dazed and white. I felt the back of his head, and when I looked at my hand it was sticky with blood.

"Only a scratch, my friend, only a scratch," he said in a dizzy voice.

"We'll see about that directly. What about the bundle? Did you find it?"

He put an arm on my shoulder and leaned heavily.

"The negro tried to run away with it. I wrench it off him and throw it over the bridge. Then I jump myself."

"Did you see where it fell?"

"Empty truck."

"Sure it didn't drop on the line?"

"Certain. I saw it land, then dropped myself. Must be three or four trucks ahead, not more. Ach, Peter, I do feel dizzy, so dizz-yl"

"Sit down and rest a minute. I'm going to find it."

Three or four trucks ahead, an empty truck . . . That

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must mean the one with the tarpaulin. I'd searched the rest and they were none of them empty.

"Hallo, there!" said an officious voice from the track. "Get down from that truck at once."

It was the signalman with the lantern. He was staring indignantly up at me, a fussy little man with steel-rimmed spectacles and a walrus moustache that kept twitching.

"That's just what I'm doing," I said, and I jumped to the ground and landed beside him.

He shook his finger at me.

"This is a goods train. There's a heavy fine for riding goods. You'd better step along with me."

"I'm busy," I said, and shook off the hand that had gripped my elbow.

He got breezy then and swore at me hard. I told him everyone jumped trains nowadays, not because they wanted to but because they had to, and that if he cared to look he'd find twenty or thirty others riding this same train besides me.

He gave a little sigh of exasperation, which puffed out the ends of his moustache.

"That's why the train has stopped. Me and the guard is mopping them up now." He pointed up the line. In the dim light I saw a group of figures huddled together beside the train. "Telephone message from Riok to stop the train."

That set me thinking furiously. I'd been so intent on finding Helpmann and the bundle that it never occurred to me that the stopping of the train had anything to do with us.

"Enemy orders, I suppose?"

"Yus, it's them as starts all the mischief," he said

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bitterly. "For a fortnight the services have been so messed up I don't know if it's Easter or Christmas. A passenger due in twelve minutes, and here's the bloomin' line blocked till the search patrol comes from Riok. And all because a couple of spies jumps from the bridge."

Grave as the news was from our point of view, I couldn't help smiling at the turn the conversation had taken. In his contempt for the enemy for mucking up his job, he had quite forgotten he was meant to be "mopping me up".

He was glancing uneasily in the direction of the road. "Should be here by now, damn them. Coming by road."

"You wouldn't be wanting to help the enemy, would you, signalman? Not a good Silvanian like yourself?"

"I'd see them in hell fire first."

"We can shake on that," I said, and I gave his hand a good shake. "I'm Silvanian born and bred, like yourself. Even if I knew who the spies were, I wouldn't for the life of me give them up. No more would you."

Just then the harsh note of a motor horn sounded in the distance and I saw a gleam of headlights over the brow of the hill.

"Look! There they come!" I cried.

While the signalman's attention was distracted, I slipped off. I heard him call to me to come back, muttering something about my not knowing what the enemy was like and that they'd shoot him if they found out he had let me go.

At which point Helpmann was good enough to create a diversion by drawing the signalman's notice to two imaginary spies escaping over the fields. So I was able to reach the Jew's truck without further hindrance.

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He was sitting on the edge of the tarpaulin where I had left him. From the agitation on his face I guessed he had overheard something of our conversation.

"I've come for that bundle," I told him curtly. "You'd better hand it over at once."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look here. You see those headlights? That's an enemy patrol car coming to search the train. They're looking for that bundle."

I've never seen a fellow change face as quickly as he did then. He dived under the tarpaulin, like a scared rabbit bolting down its hole. So as to hurry things up, I took hold of the corner string and whipped back the tarpaulin. To my astonishment I saw three dark frightened faces staring up at me, the faces of a woman and two small girls, one of whom started to whimper. The mother gave me an imploring look. "We thought there might be food inside."

"That's the truth," said the Jew, who was parcelling up the contents of the bundle.

"Give me some food," said the mother. "Not for myself, but the children. They've had nothing for two days."

"If I had any with me, you wouldn't need to ask," I said. I gave her some money, which was the best I could do.

"Here it is," said the Jew, thrusting the bundle in my arms. "Now leave us, the soldiers are almost here."

"You've taken nothing out?"

"Only the thermos flask. The glass was broken, no use. The children drank what there was, but most of it had run out."

Already I was astride the side of the truck.

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"If you take my advice you'll stay where you are. Don't panic. The soldiers won't harm you. They're in too much of a hurry to find — somebody else. Good luck!"

I vaulted to the ground, the precious bundle under my arm. A low whistle from the other side of the line told me where Helpmann was, and I dodged under one of the couplings to join him.

Together we ran down the bank and into the field, Helpmann holding on to my wrist, for he was still pretty dazed from the head wound. As we ran into the shelter of the pine wood on the far side of the field, I heard the patrol lorry pull up by the signal box.



CHAPTER XVI

THE RACE FOR THE SECRET LANDING GROUND

THE next few hours were a nightmare. A piece of poetry went round and round in my mind. It was a bit out of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

A shout from the wood, the sound of wheels on a road, of footsteps on a mountain path, and the breaking of a twig by an uneasy squirrel were enough to send our hearts leaping into our mouths.

We did not take the torch from the bundle till we were

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safely in the shelter of the pine wood, where we used it as sparingly as possible. The wood was thick and climbed steeply up the side of the valley, so steeply that in places we had to haul ourselves up by the lower branches. This was relatively easy, for there was mercifully very little undergrowth and the slope, thickly cushioned with pine needles, was soft and springy to tread on.

Soon we came out on to a narrow lane that seemed to be winding in wide zigzags up the hill. Without a map and with only a compass to guide us, we needed precise information about our whereabouts before proceeding further. So we stopped at a cottage and were told that the Trellava valley (where the secret landing ground was to be found) was some ten kilometres to the north-west. The proper way to reach it was to descend to Slenov, the village where the train was halted, and turn north at Bartok. Was there, we asked, any way of getting there without descending again to the main valley? Yes, we could go over the Plekno Ridge if we preferred, but it would take much longer; the going was rough and meant climbing two thousand feet and descending the ridge beyond. After making several further inquiries about the route, we decided to risk it. But before we left I made our informant promise to say nothing about our visit if anyone else called. I also bought an old jacket and mackintosh cape from him.

Soon after this, as we came into a clearing in the wood, we heard the whistle of the goods train below as it started again. There was the faraway impatient snorting of the engine, the red gleam from her fires, and the pinprick of red light from the guard's van dwindling and vanishing into the distance. We listened for the lorry,

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but there wasn't a sound. The valley seemed a long way below us — I suppose we must have made about five hundred feet of climbing by then. The time was ten o'clock, and rain was beginning to fall.

It poured almost non-stop for the next twelve hours. By eleven o'clock we were pretty wet, in spite of the shelter the trees gave us. Soon after midnight we struck upon a disused hut beside a rock quarry where we decided to snatch a few hours' rest. The going had been rougher than we expected and we were not as high up the ridge as we had hoped. But we were both exhausted.

What a night it was, with the wind blowing through the holes in the walls and the rain dripping through the rotten roof! We daren't light a fire to dry out our wet clothes for fear it might be seen. Instead, we lay huddled together in a corner, trying to relax our stiff, cramped limbs and snatch a little sleep.

This miserable hovel was the scene of our first and only quarrel. I was just dropping off when Helpmann dug his elbow into my ribs and said I stank abominably. He was right, of course. You can't fall into a cattle truck full of cow-dung and emerge entirely odourless. He told me to go and lie down at the other end of the hut. I said that in a draughty hole like this we'd never sleep unless we lay together and warmed each other, and he must put up with the smell. He got up without a word and lay down in the far corner. The result was that we neither of us slept and were too bad-tempered in the morning to be civil.

But the cold and the wet weren't our only troubles. There were rats! Big, hungry rats, bold and inquisitive rats.* They popped up from the worm-eaten boards,

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jumped down from shelves and rafters. They ran over my feet and brushed their whiskers against my face. I threw stones at them, and they didn't seem to mind a bit.

I still had the newspaper I had bought at Riok. Sick of trying to snatch some sleep, I sat up and with numb fingers scribbled in the margin all I could remember of the route to the secret landing ground and of the landmarks round it. The muddy paw of a rat scampering across added an extra landmark. When I had finished, I tore the margin off and stuffed it in the breast pocket of my shirt. All this was done more for the sake of passing the time than for any practical use.

We were up and away a good hour before dawn, clambering up through the sodden, dripping woods beyond the quarry. It was a considerable strain, climbing at the rate we did on empty stomachs, and when we reached the edge of the tree line and emerged on to the lower rocks of the bleak and windy Plekno Ridge, I was sick with hunger.

"Ach, Peter, what wouldn't a man give for a good draught of cocoa! Scald-ing co-coa!" said Helpmann.

The thought of Helpmann's greasy cocoa made me feel sicker than ever, and I told him to keep his reflections to himself.

We scrambled half way up the ridge, then rested for a breather and took our bearings. The valley was full of mist in which the hills on the far side floated like islands, islands which grew taller each minute as the mist evaporated. The quarry and the lower half of the wood through which we had come were still shrouded. But even as we watched, the mist thinned into long wisps and cleared from the quarry.

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"Look! That must be the hovel," said Helpmann. "Tiny as the toy brick of a leetle child."

"And, if I'm not very much mistaken, there's someone prowling around in front. Two, three people."

I looked down intently on the tiny figures, my mind alert and suspicious.

"I wish we had some glasses," said Helpmann.

But there was no need for glasses. The shoddy peaked caps and rifles slung across their backs, all too characteristic of our pursuers, were just discernible. So they were on our tracks again, and we had little more than an hour's start of them.

The awkward thing was that we were in full view, and if they chose to look up they could hardly avoid spotting us. A good hundred yards of steepish and completely exposed cliff separated us from the edge of the ridge. A hundred yards between us and safety! We must cover it somehow, quickly and without being seen.

I talked the matter over with Helpmann and we decided to make a dash at once, while they were still in and out of the hovel and rummaging round the quarry for our footprints.

"For God's sake tread carefully, Helpmann," I said. "There are loose stones and shale everywhere. The slightest touch is enough to send a brute like that —" I pointed to a stone the size of a large football — "bounding down the hill. You know what a din falling stones can make."

"Never fear, my friend," said Helpmann reassuringly. "When I give my mind to it, I can tread as quietly as a cat, as lightly as a float-ing feath-er."

I was not so sure, for I remembered what had happened



... A noisy avalanche of loose stones

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on the bridge at Riok. Helpmann had a genius for giving the show away.

And on this occasion he was once more true to form. We were within a stone's throw of the ridge when he caught his foot on a loose piece the size of a wastepaper basket, resting precariously on top of a boulder. Off it slid, dropping with a crack on the slab below. I tried to save it, but I was too late. The drop had split it in two, and both stones were already charging down the slope with gathering momentum, a noisy avalanche of loose stones in their wake. I was so angry that I almost wished it was Helpmann and not the stones careering down the slope.

I cried to him not to move, to lie dead still. For myself, I lay flat on the ground, hardly daring to breathe. It can't have been more than a few moments before the avalanche spent itself. In the awful silence that followed I did not dare to look down, to see if we had been spotted.

The answer came in the form of two rifle reports, ringing out in quick succession. In the hollow of the rock quarry they echoed like a thunderclap.

"Run for the ridge!" I cried. "They'll have a job to hit us at this range. Run like hell!"

Next minute, with scratched hands and torn trousers, too breathless to speak, we were over the top, with the ridge between us and the bullets.

We were in the Trellava valley, looking down upon a tumbled world of rock and forest, edged on the skyline with the frontier hills. I call them hills and not mountains, for they were lower here than anywhere else in the northern range, and it was for this reason that the valley

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had been chosen for the scene of our escape. Autogyros have a lower ceiling than aeroplanes, and the smallness of the landing ground — a bare patch among the trees, about the size of two tennis courts — made an autogyro the most suitable choice for the first stage of our journey home. On reaching allied territory we were to be transferred to a larger plane.

"Well?" said Helpmann when he had recovered his breath. "Can you see it — the landing ground, I mean?"

I could see little more than forest and a rocky cleft cutting it in two from east to west. Even the road was hidden for most of its winding way, and the village — south-east of our route and far below us — was almost engulfed by trees. No hope of spotting the landing ground yet, for we had a long way to go, but I was able to gauge our direction from the compass.

"Due north-west from here and straight through that larch wood. Come on," I said. "No time to waste. They'll be shinning up that ridge any moment."

"Looks like rain soon. And mountain mist."

"Mist ought to help us," I said.

We ran down the slope (not a steep one) and into the wood. When an hour later we emerged from the wood at the edge of the rocky cleft, we had not dropped more than four or five hundred feet.

So we followed along the edge of the cleft for some way, keeping as far as possible to the cover of the trees. It grew wider and less steep as we went, and some tumbled tree trunks enabled us to cross it about a mile further down without being seen. We saw no more of our pursuers.

For the rest of the morning we were toiling uphill through the thick wood on the far side, and when we

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emerged in the afternoon on to the open pasturage beyond, the mist had descended — a wet, choking mist that obscured everything, reducing visibility to a mere ten paces.

Memory of the map was no use to me, for we were still east of the route I had memorized. There was small hope of our sighting any of the landmarks — the chapel, the little tarn, the byres.

All afternoon we blundered on, with only the compass to guide us. As the hours till nightfall grew fewer and fewer, the more hopeless I felt about our chances of finding the landing ground. We knew that if we didn't find it in time to reconnoitre it by daylight, to decide on the positions for the flares, we should never get away.

At seven o'clock, with only an hour and a half of daylight before us, we made a fateful decision. We were lost. The ground was bleak and stony where we had expected to find open pasturage. I thought the clump of trees that hid the secret landing ground still lay to the west of us. Helpmann thought to the north. Time was short and we decided to go our own ways and explore, keeping in touch with each other by whistle. Each of us carried a good whistle, an indispensable item in a mountaineer's equipment. We arranged various signals: two blasts for a landmark like the chapel; three for the landing ground; a series of short blasts for danger.

It was a stupid decision to make. As a mountaineer of some experience, I ought to have known better. In a mist never to separate yourself from your companions is a golden rule for mountaineers. I have only myself to blame for what happened. Helpmann was all for our sticking together, whichever direction we decided on,

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and he was right. By his over-assurance he had blundered and risked our lives twice already. I thought he was wrong again.

And so, when barely a quarter of a mile from the landing ground — though we had no idea of this at the time — we parted company. Three, four, five strides, and he was swallowed in the mist.

As soon as he was out of sight, I knew I had done wrong. But I hadn't the sense to call him back or to follow. With a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach, I launched off westwards.

After a few minutes I blew my whistle. He answered with a single blast. It was comforting to know he wasn't far from me.

The ground grew stonier and steeper. I realized that I was too far to the west, that I must be striking the western flank of the Trellava valley. I blew my whistle again.

There was no answer.

I blew it again, a long shrill blast that rang out frighteningly clear in that bleak mountain wilderness.

This time I had an answer, but a very faint one. I thought there were two blasts, but I wasn't certain. Anyway, I knew I must join him, for he could not be more hopelessly astray than I was.

I turned round and ran back the way I had come. At least, I think it was the way I had come. In that world of blank whiteness every direction was the same, unless you checked up by compass. And I was in too much of a hurry to do that.

I blew again.

The answer came a little clearer this time — two distinct blasts! So he had found a landmark. I almost

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cheered for joy, and ran on into the mist, in the direction of the whistle.

Some trees butted out of the fog to meet me — I just stopped myself in time from diving into a pine trunk. I looked down at my feet and saw that they were on a path, a thin straggling path, but a path all the same. Where did it lead to? And which way had Helpmann gone? I felt instinctively he had not gone into the wood. I did not like that wood. The trees were dripping with moisture; dampness oozed from every leaf and branch. The stillness was broken by no bird song, and the whole atmosphere was unfriendly and menacing. *Which way had Helpmann gone?*

I blew my whistle.

The two short blasts that answered me suggested that he was near enough to be within hailing distance, though I found it difficult to pin down the direction.

"Where are you?" I shouted. "Are you in the wood?"

Muffled by the trees, my voice sounded curiously dead. There was no answer.

"Hallo-o-o-o!" I called, cupping my hands.

Still no answer. He must be further off than I thought. I whistled again.

Looking back now, I realize that I ought to have been surprised at being answered by only a single blast — and from inside the wood too. I could almost have sworn that the last whistle had come from a different direction. Overcoming my feeling of repulsion for the wood, I ran straight in.

A hundred yards brought me to a clearing, where the turf was level and springy. The turf of the secret landing ground was level and springy, so Maclaren had told me.

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I ran to the middle of the clearing. Dimly in the mist I could see the flanking pines, about the length of a tennis court away. The similarity between what I saw and what Maclaren had told me of the landing ground was too striking for me to believe it was mere coincidence. In my joy I gave three shrill blasts on the whistle.

I was answered from close behind me. Three blasts.

"Thank God I've found you," I said, as I bounded over to the trees. "And the landing ground, too. What luck!"

But it wasn't Helpmann waiting for me under the trees. Helpmann hadn't a gun like that, nor did he wear enemy uniform.

I turned and fled across the clearing — and ran right into de Kretser. I looked wildly round, only to find that I was completely trapped. Three soldiers with rifles were closing in upon me from the surrounding trees: de Kretser in front of me was pointing a revolver at my head.

"It was thoughtful of you to drop your map!" he sneered.



CHAPTER XVII

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"WE have been waiting for you a long time," said de Kretser with a kind of weary harshness. "It was inconsiderate of you to keep us waiting. It is so cold at this height and the mist gets into your lungs." He coughed affectedly, then gave some orders to the soldiers in his own language.

I was marched off between two of them, with de Kretser and the third soldier, a lance-corporal, behind me — across the clearing and out of the wood, the opposite side from the one I entered by. Soon we struck the beginning of a path, which we followed down a steep incline to the lower pasturage. I had never been here before, but I knew where we were. I remembered from the map that we should soon strike the Black Tarn and the tiny Chapel of the Virgin beside it.

At the foot of the incline they hesitated about the direction. I could have told them anything they wanted

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to know, but I was feeling too bitter to care now where I was taken.

De Kretser took my map out of his pocket and while he was looking at it I was fool enough to try a breakaway. On the instant I heard the crack of de Kretser's revolver and felt a hot pain across the back of my wrist. If I had been a thousandth of an inch less lucky, my wrist would have been broken, as for a moment I thought it was. Fortunately it was only the flesh had been torn. But the shot staggered me in my flight, and the next moment the lance-corporal had grabbed my arm, with the blood of my wounded wrist oozing between his fingers. I had tasted a bare twenty seconds of freedom.

"I didn't think you could be so unintelligent," said de Kretser contemptuously.

He took no further precautions against my running away. He knew I wouldn't try again.

Black Tarn was an inky blot in the mist, very black and very still, with four or five bleak trees on the brink.

They took me to the chapel, kicked the door open and pushed me roughly in. I might have been a runaway pig being hounded into its sty. There was a small crucifix on the wall, which wobbled from side to side as the door handle struck the plaster. They roped me, standing, to one of the two pillars that carried the weight of the roof, binding me tight under the arms and over the ankles. My wrists were tied in front of me. I protested at this, for although I had only been hit in the fleshy part, the wound was painful and the handkerchief I had tied round it sodden with blood. De Kretser took no notice at all, but continued to give his orders to the soldiers calmly and quietly. Unlike Helpmann, who was an expert, I could

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not speak their language with any fluency. But I could understand the general drift of what they were saying. When I spoke, I spoke in Silvanian. I asked de Kretser about the Mendls, but he would tell me nothing about them.

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked.

"That depends on you." As he spoke, de Kretser removed a grenade and a coil of fuse from his pocket and laid them down in the window niche.

"So that's your game, is it?" I said.

"We shan't use it unless we have to. I repeat, it depends on you. If you co-operate, answer our questions truthfully, then . . ."

"I shall tell you nothing."

"That's what they all say."

De Kretser struck a match. For a dreadful moment I thought he meant to light the fuse and settle with me there and then. But he was merely lighting a cigarette.

"Nevertheless, you *will* talk," he said, drawing in the smoke and puffing it out into my face. "Sooner or later they all do. In these matters, you understand, we are not accustomed to fail."

"You have great confidence in your abilities, Sergeant de Kretser."

"No, in our Intelligence Service. I am not in the Intelligence. An officer will be here in the morning to question you. As I have already said, your fate now rests with you."

He turned to the two soldiers and spoke rapidly to them.

Suddenly he whipped round on me and said, "When is your plane due?"

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"I shall tell you nothing."

He came right up to me, till the point of his cigarette was almost touching the tip of my nose, then repeated the question.

I shook my head and in doing so knocked the cigarette from his mouth.

He swore as he picked it up, then brutally stubbed it against my cheek. It was like the point of a red hot poker and made me cry out with pain.

"You cry for so little? It is nothing to what they will do to you in the morning."

I believe he asked me again about the plane, but I am not sure. I believe he said something about Helpmann, though whether it was a question or statement I don't know. His voice seemed to echo meaninglessly round the walls, the candle swayed drunkenly towards me, and the last thing I felt was the bite of the cords into my chest and a sudden crescendo of throbbing in my wrist as I plunged into black oblivion.

When I came to he had gone, and the two soldiers were sitting on the floor against the wall playing cards by the light of a candle stuck in a bottle.

I was suffering from a burning thirst and asked for water. Neither took any notice but went on with the game, in which they seemed wholly absorbed. However, when the hand was over, one of them slouched over with his water-bottle and allowed me a few sips, enough to ease my throat. I asked if I might be allowed to sit down, but he pretended not to understand and returned to his cards.

Meanwhile I looked round me.

The chapel was tiny, the size of a small kitchen, and

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lit by a small window high up in the wall. I could see it wasn't yet dark outside, though it was gloomy enough inside. The only other light there was filtered through a grating behind the altar, shedding a ghostly blue light over a small painted statue of the Virgin and Child. This statue with its gilt crown and sparkling stones fascinated me. Ranged in a line inside the altar rail was a variety of objects, from which I could make out several sticks and crutches. The guide book tells you that these were placed here by invalids who claimed to have been healed. For a moment I considered them as possible weapons, but not one was strong enough to be useful in a hand-to-hand struggle, even if I could get free.

The only other object of note in the chapel was a door knob, the knob to the inner door in the wall where the crucifix hung. I thought it might come in useful as a weapon, for it projected slightly and seemed loose. It was a good hefty knob. If only I could lean forward and grasp it! But I couldn't move. I was stuck to that pillar as effectively as a fly to a flypaper.

I looked again at my captors, slouching over their cards, their rifles lying forgotten beside them. The candle leaned drunkenly out of the bottle neck, the grease dripping onto a heap of Silvanian coins, the red-nosed soldier's winnings. If only I could wrench myself free of the cords! But they were cruelly tight. If I struggled at all, they cut into me like wire into a grocer's cheese.

So the minutes rolled on. I got used to my discomfort and the bouts of dizziness it brought on. I became drowsy, barely conscious of my surroundings and of the two guards as they played tirelessly on and on. . . .

Suddenly I was brought with a start to my senses. The

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rusty hinges of the outside door grated open, the draught blowing the candle out. A short, dark figure was standing silhouetted against the evening light.

The soldiers shuffled to their feet. In the dark I could see no more than a jumble of shadows, but I think they grabbed their rifles for I heard the butts clank against the stone floor, followed by the voice of a woman. It sounded surprised and angry.

The beam of a pocket torch flashed upon me. Then the soldiers stepped between me and her, blotting out the light. They told her roughly to go out.

But she had no intention of going. She said she had walked up from the valley to visit the shrine, but had lost the way. After some blustering they let her come in, and she went straight into the adjoining cell. A few moments later she emerged with a lantern in her hand, the light falling upon the white veils and dark robes of a nun. She seemed not to notice the rifle pointed at her, but walked straight up to me. Then, holding the lantern up to my face, she gave me a keen and anxious look. She was very short — her head hardly reached to my chest — and her face was old and wrinkled and full of compassion.

When she had surveyed me closely from head to foot, she told the soldiers I was ill, that I was bound too tightly and that my wrist needed attention. That started an argument which quickly faded into the distance as the blackness overwhelmed me once more.

When I came to my senses, I was lying on the floor at the base of the pillar, with the nun on her knees beside me. She helped me to sit up with my back to the pillar and gave me water from an aluminium flask. Then she

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opened a packet of sandwiches, which she had apparently brought for herself, and told me to eat them up.

The soldiers watched us both suspiciously while I was eating, but they did not interfere except to silence me when I tried to speak to her. Nor did they interfere with the washing and bandaging of my wounded wrist, to which the nun attended like a practised nurse. She worked quickly and skilfully, with the veils tucked behind her ears and her sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her arms were white and tiny as a doll's, her hands thin and blue-veined.

"The wound is not serious," she said as she cleaned it with the remaining water from the flask. "Bound tight with those cords, it would never have healed."

She tore my handkerchief into strips for a bandage.

"It is terrible how these soldiers have treated this holy place. I came as a pilgrim, intending to pass the night in the cell. But they have forbidden me to stay."

At this point the red-nosed soldier told her brusquely to stop talking, to hurry up with the bandaging and clear out.

I longed to speak to her, to drop some hint about Helpmann, to get a message to him. But the soldiers were watching us too carefully. I did not dare, for it would mean risking her life as well as my own. Nevertheless I thought wistfully of the pencil stub in my shirt pocket and the envelope with the rough map I had scribbled in the hovel on the previous night. If only I could have them in my hand. Five words would be enough. No, two words — FRIEND OUTSIDE — would convey to her all I wanted.

But the soldiers never took their eyes off us, and I could think of no ruse to distract their attention.

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And so the chance passed. All too soon the bandaging was finished and she had gone out into the night. God knows where she spent it. In the woods, I suppose, and a good deal more uncomfortably than I.

The soldiers did not make me stand again, nor did they bind my wrists. I was allowed to lie full length on the stone floor, roped loosely by the waist to the pillar, and thus to get some measure of sleep. They took it in turns to watch me through the night, with a loaded rifle handy. No wonder they were surly about it, for it meant a certain amount of trouble and no more card-playing. But it would pay them in the long run, for there was no point in finishing me off before my interrogation in the morning. Not that I believe they bothered to think the matter out. They struck me as too stupid for that.

As I dozed away, I blessed the old nun for her kindness and wondered at her influence over my captors. With a night's sleep, she was giving me the strength that the next day would demand.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

I SLEPT fitfully and was awake about an hour before dawn. Dawn was the time for our rendezvous with the plane, and if all went according to plan I should be hearing it soon. While the tiny chapel window turned slowly from inky blackness to grey, I listened for the first sound of the engine. The red-nosed soldier, who was on guard, rarely took his eyes off me. I could hear the snores of the other one from the adjoining cell, where he was asleep on the bed which the nun should have had.

At last, after endless crawling minutes, the faint drone of the engine! As I listened to it throbbing louder and louder as it approached, I felt profoundly depressed. I wriggled desperately at the ropes, thinking to dash out and meet the plane — to warn it away — to join Helpmann — to direct the plane's fire . . . But the red-nosed soldier was listening too, listening and watching me, with his rifle across his knees.

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If Helpmann was waiting at the edge of the clearing, I hoped he would act alone, although I doubted whether he would leave me in the lurch. Or had de Kretser already captured him and laid another trap? Was there a patrol waiting in the clearing?

At about a thousand feet, to judge from the sound, the drone steadied, and I guessed the pilot must be circling overhead looking for the landing ground. He would land very soon now, and I should know the worst.

But the drone grew no louder. He seemed to be circling round and round and coming no closer. I was puzzled to know what this meant. Had Helpmann lighted the danger signal, the red flare, to warn him off?

Then suddenly I heard the bark of gunfire — it sounded like Spandaus. So there *was* an enemy patrol in the wood, after all. The drone of the plane was fainter than it had been — twelve, thirteen hundred feet? They would be lucky to bring her down at that height. Several volleys rang out. But the pilot wasn't waiting for more. The drone grew fainter, the firing ceased, and soon the only sound to break the stillness was the snoring of the soldier in the cell.

Twenty minutes later de Kretser came in. He didn't seem at all put out by the failure to shoot down the plane. On the contrary he was quite pleased with himself.

"Well, we've scared him away," he told me in his self-satisfied way, "and he won't trouble us any more. That's cooked *your* goose."

It was several moments before he took in the fact that I was no longer in the same position as he had left me the previous night. He asked the guard angrily why he had allowed me to lie on the ground. The guard told him

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that I'd been ill. He didn't say anything about the nun.

"Tie him up," said de Kretser. "And if he's not bound properly to the pillar when I come back, there'll be trouble for you. Hey, Lansbrucke, get out of bed!"

The other soldier, sleepy-eyed and looking more stupid than ever, appeared in the cell door and was ordered to help in the tying-up operations. De Kretser did the finishing touches himself.

"Who bound up his wrist?"

"I did," said the red-nosed soldier.

"You'll confine yourself to orders in future," said de Kretser. I thought he was going to tear off the bandage. Instead he bound my wrists together more tightly than ever. Then he looked up at me.

"I'm going to meet the Intelligence Officer now. We shall be back in an hour's time. You have till then to think out your answers. If they are the right sort, you have nothing to fear. If not, you know what to expect," and he pointed to the grenade and fuse lying on the sill.

"You think of everything," I said.

As he was going out, I asked again about the Mendls, but he would do nothing to allay my anxiety.

"I have seen to them also," he replied. "As you say, I think of everything."

The Intelligence Officer blew in like a whirlwind, a huge, burly fellow, surprisingly agile for his size and middle age. He wore jack-boots, long overcoat and peaked cap, and on his shoulders the gold braid of an enemy captain. He was sweating like a pig with the exertion of his walk and in the foulest of tempers, ready to find fault with everything. I never believed that any-

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one could have the power to overawe de Kretser as Captain Lingstrom did. Everything de Kretser had done was wrong. Several times he tried to speak up for himself, only to be swept away in the torrent of the captain's abuse.

I won't attempt to reproduce all this. He spoke too fast for me to follow everything. But the main drift was clear enough, and it pleased me mightily. Apparently, on his way up in the "wolf-cub" (the small car used by enemy officers), the captain had spotted a man high up on the mountain, escaping towards the frontier. He had stopped to check up with his glasses — there could be no doubt that the fugitive was Helpmann. What had de Kretser been doing to let him escape like that? Why had he not been more alert? Why hadn't he done this, that and the other? The questions thundered out in a series of explosions, while de Kretser tried in vain to explain that he had picketed the wood and concentrated most of the patrol on the landing ground.

The captain took not the slightest notice of the explanations. He ordered the two soldiers to go in pursuit of Helpmann at once, taking them outside to point out the way. From what he was saying, I gathered that the rest of the patrol had already been sent after Helpmann and that two more patrols of scratch mountain troops had been sent for by phone from Trellava.

"But what about the prisoner, sir?" said de Kretser. "We can't leave him here unguarded."

"Since you are so inefficient, you had better leave him to me. I couldn't do worse by him than you have done. Just look at the way that rope has been tied! Why, a child could slip out of it."



Everything de Kretser had done was wrong

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"Indeed he couldn't, sir," said de Kretser. "It has been done correctly and —"

But the captain wasn't listening. "Excuses, nothing but excuses!" he thundered. "I shall see to the prisoner myself. I shall question him thoroughly and then, if I still need him, I shall drive him back to headquarters with me. If I don't need him, then I shall get rid of him. There are various ways, you know, Sergeant de Kretser, of disposing of superfluous personnel."

The hint in the last words was well to de Kretser's taste, and he wasn't slow to draw the captain's attention to the grenade and fuse on the sill.

"A fire-work display, what? Splendid, splendid," said the captain warmly. "That's the first sensible thing you've thought of. I shall light the fuse myself. But just look at the way you've tied that rope!"

He strode over to me and jerked at the knot over my chest. I wondered what was his objection to it, for it was so tight it had almost suffocated me.

"Sergeant de Kretser, I'm going to show you the proper way to bind a prisoner. The double overknot is what you want."

"Couldn't you show me afterwards, sir?" said de Kretser. "I mean — wouldn't it be better to question the prisoner first while he's tied, and then —?"

The captain spun round on his heel. I could not see the look on his face, but I saw the effect on de Kretser. He shrivelled up against the wall.

"You take your orders from me," said the captain, controlling himself with an effort. "The examination can wait. What's behind that door?"

Before de Kretser had time to answer, he went on.

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"Find me something to sit on. I shall need it for the examination. Get along, man, there must be a bench or something in that room."

De Kretser disappeared into the cell. While he was out of sight, the captain took out a pocket knife and, to my astonishment, with two slashes cut the knot clean out and slipped it into his pocket.

"What did I tell you, sergeant?" he rapped out, as de Kretser appeared in the doorway carrying a rough stool. "Anybody could undo a knot like that. It just falls apart when you touch it. Shocking negligence. Put down that stool and come here."

The rope was clear of my chest now and I could breathe freely. I was free, but for the cords that still bound my ankles and wrists.

The captain had seized de Kretser and was lining him up against the pillar, the wretched man feebly protesting that it was unsafe to leave me like that.

"He won't try any tricks on me, don't worry," said the captain.

I felt a nailed boot against my shin as he thrust his right leg between my two and hooked my knee against his. He was taking no chances with me. Not that I had given a thought to escaping yet. I was still rather faint with being bound so tight, as well as bewildered with the speed at which everything was happening.

As soon as de Kretser had been bound to the pillar — none too securely, as it seemed to me — I felt the grip on my knee relax and the captain drew his leg free of mine. At the same time he whipped out the revolver from his holster and pointed it not at me but at de Kretser.

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I heard a quiet, familiar voice say in English, "Well, Peter my friend, how's that for a neat job? He is not as firmly bound as you were. But I never was much good at tying knots."

The speaker was Lingstrom, but the voice was Helpmann's. The disguise had taken me in completely.

"The examination is now unnecessary, but not, I think, the fireworks," said Helpmann. "After all the trouble you've taken, Sergeant de Kretser, it would be a pity to waste that grenade."

I looked at de Kretser. The surprise had drained from his face and a sort of dogged defiance had taken its place.

"What are you going to do with me?" he said.

"Untie you and strip your uniform. Peter will attend to that," said Helpmann. "But I warn you, any tomfoolery and you'll be shot."

He covered him with the revolver while I undid the rope.

De Kretser undressed in silence and let me tie him up again without resisting. Before I bound his wrists, he asked me to take his ring and the wallet containing some letters and photos of his family and to leave them outside for the patrol to pick up. I glanced through his papers — photographs of his wife and children, two letters with Yugo-Latian stamps, his army identity booklet. The photographs brought him to life in my eyes as something more than a brutish mercenary. He was no longer a blustering bully and certainly no coward. He was facing death with courage and the steely indifference that neither gives nor expects any quarter.

When he was bound securely, Helpmann told me to put on de Kretser's uniform, which I did at once. But

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I felt an awful clown in it, for it was too tight for me and the trousers hardly reached below my calves. I had to slit the cap at the back before it would fit my head. My own clothes I stuffed into the haversack in the hope of being able to change back into them later. I kept de Kretser's identity papers, his holster and revolver, as well as recovering my map.

Meanwhile Helpmann busied himself with the grenade, fixing the detonator on the end of the fuse and placing it inside. De Kretser watched every action with a tense, strained look.

Helpmann placed the grenade about six inches from the prisoner's feet and uncoiled the fuse towards the door and out.

"What about the Mendls, de Kretser?" I said. "It can't hurt you to tell me about them now. It may hurt me, but you won't mind that."

He glared at me sullenly.

"Did they get away to the mountains in time?" I pressed. And when he still refused to answer, I lost my temper. "My God! If you've done anything to them, I—"

"Since you are so concerned, why not go and see for yourself?"

"I shall indeed."

"Don't expect to find much when you get there. I've destroyed the farm."

"And the family as well?"

"You know the punishment for sheltering spies."

"You filthy swine!" I cried. And with all the punch I'd got I drove my fist into his face. I would have given him more, only Helpmann was calling me from outside.

"Come on out, Peter! I can't keep Captain Lingstrom

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waiting. I've got him trussed up in the ravine, and I don't trust my knots to last as long as de Kretser's. I say, have you got a match to light this fuse? I've tried the captain's pockets, but he seems to be a non-smoker."

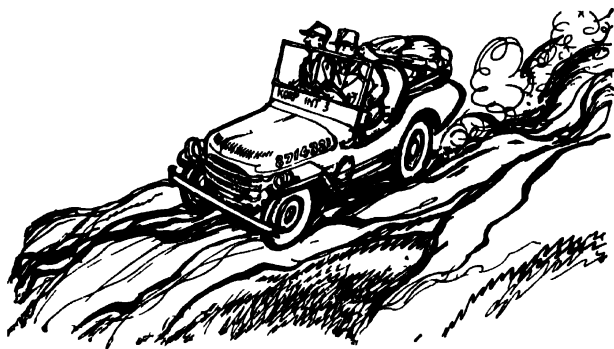
I had no matches left. So Helpmann came inside the chapel and, stepping up to de Kretser, said with icy politeness, "Can you oblige me with a match, my friend?"

I found a box in the cell and tossed it over to Helpmann. Then, with a final glance at de Kretser — he did not appear to be enjoying Helpmann's joke — I followed my rescuer out into the open.

The fuse was a long one and stretched to a pine tree some twenty or thirty feet from the chapel door. Evidently Helpmann meant to prolong the suspense as long as possible. I suggested dragging de Kretser out into the open and doing the job there, as I didn't like the idea of the chapel being damaged. But Helpmann refused and told me to leave the matter to him.

Then he lit the fuse.

We did not wait for the explosion, but ran down the hill towards Trellava together.



CHAPTER XIX

THE LONE SNIPER

I HAD forgotten to leave de Kretser's wallet and ring behind, as I promised.

"You can't go back now," said Helpmann. "We can leave them with Captain Lingstrom."

We hurried on down the slope.

"It's taking a long time to go off," I said.

"What, the wallet?"

"The grenade. D'you think it's a dud?"

"No, no, it is not a dud," panted Helpmann. "But it will not explode."

"What d'you mean?"

"Ach, this greatcoat, it is stifling! I am the boiler of a locomotive." Helpmann stopped running and unbuttoned the collar. "You see, I cut the fuse half way." He gulped back his breath. "Thought I'd just give him a scare."

"I'm glad the chapel's being spared. It would have been a pity to blow it up," I said.

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"The fright of his life," said Helpmann.

To judge from the shouting that now started in the chapel, de Kretser seemed to be getting over the fright pretty quickly.

"We can't let him do that. The patrol will hear him — they're not so very far away," I said.

I ran back up the hill to the chapel.

De Kretser stopped his noise when he saw his own revolver pointed at him. But I could not bring myself to pull the trigger and put an end to him there and then. Instead I gagged him thoroughly and threw the wallet and ring at his feet, beside the grenade and the line of unlit fuse.

Then I went outside and looked up at the mountain to see if the patrol had heard his shouts. They were a long way off now, above the tree line, still climbing in the direction that Helpmann had sent them. If they had turned back, I should have gone into the chapel and shot de Kretser.

I rejoined Helpmann about a mile down the slope, where the track from Trellava petered out.

"Everything's all right," he said. "The wolf-cub's still where I left it, and so is Captain Lingstrom."

Another hundred yards brought us to the wolf-cub and the edge of the ravine.

"He grins from ear to ear --- like the Cheshire Cat. That's the effect of the gag I gave him," said Helpmann. "Like to have a peep?"

"Is he trussed up all right?"

"Oh yes. Pre-cise-ly as I left him. Only his blood pressure has climbed. His face is purple — it is a beet-root!"

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"We'd better get going," I said.

But Helpmann insisted on my having a look at his prisoner. The ravine was not a deep one, and we had only to part the bushes and peer down to get a bird's-eye view of Captain Lingstrom. He was lying on a narrow shelf of rock, bound hand and foot, with a twenty foot drop to the rocky bottom if he wriggled. Two feet above him was a much wider ledge.

"I lowered him onto the ledge with the rope. So!" said Helpmann. "It was quite easy."

It certainly was a neat piece of placing. Unbound, a man could have scrambled easily to the safety of the upper ledge. Bound, any movement he made would as likely as not tip him over the edge. I didn't envy Captain Lingstrom.

Helpmann wished him a happy Christmas, and we returned to the car. I had never seen him so jocular and merry.

A wolf-cub is rather like a jeep, only smaller (a two-seater) and not so well sprung. As we bumped down the rutty track to Trellava, with Helpmann at the wheel, I tried to get him to tell me how he had captured Captain Lingstrom and the car, how he had found out what had happened to me and traced me to the chapel. It was like getting water out of a dried up well. He never liked talking about himself. All he would tell me was that he had rolled a small boulder onto the track, big enough to halt the car, and waited with his revolver for the captain to drive up.

"He didn't give me any trouble. Put up his hands, stepped out of the car and let me tie him up. Behaved like a perfect gentleman."

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"Yes, but how did you know he was coming? How did you get on to it all in the first place?"

"It is forbidden to talk to the driver, Peter. I don't want to pitch us into the ravine."

"Were you listening outside the chapel when de Kretser —"

"No, no. I tell you later."

Whenever I asked for the story, there was some excuse. And if I raised the matter again, he would say he had told me once already and that I was growing old and forgetful. All I could gather was that he had stumbled on de Kretser some time after my capture, and had followed him down to Trellava. Things were made clearer when we arrived in the village.

Trellava was alive with troops who had just come and were still dismounting from two trucks as we drew up. I was keen to carry straight on without stopping, but unfortunately I was not at the wheel. We pulled up outside the inn.

"I want a word with the innkeeper, Peter," said Helpmann. "Come in and help me. You know the language."

The taproom was low-raftered and dark.

"*This* man is the clever one, Peter. Couldn't have found you without him. I want to —"

"Ssh! You don't know who's about," I said uneasily, wondering if the room was as empty as it looked.

He pushed open a door into an inner room, where we saw an old man and his wife sitting together over a low fire. She was sewing. His head peered up at us out of a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Thank him for me, Peter — a bouquet of Silvanian

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thank-yous. The old man listened while de Kretser was phoning — ”

“Phoning?”

“There is the phone in the corner there. De Kretser phoned headquarters about you last night, to arrange Captain Lingstrom’s little visit. The old chap made out half of it and he remembered to tell me some of the words he didn’t understand. Enough for me to go on.”

I thanked the innkeeper as fervently as I knew how, though rather impatiently. For I could hear banging on the outside door. We were too close to the enemy for my liking and I wanted to get away before we were cornered.

“Ask him to cut the telephone line,” said Helpmann.

I did so quickly, then set about trying to get Helpmann away. It was the devil of a job. I think he would have stayed shaking the old man’s hand till it dropped off. But thanks to the maddening delight he took in running risks, I was in for another scare yet.

The taproom was already full of soldiers. We brushed past them and went outside. There was nobody by the car and we could easily have got away undisturbed. Only what does Helpmann do but march straight up to the nearest sergeant and start blabbing to him! And about *himself*, too. He spun a yarn about how he had escaped and was still at large high up on the mountain.

“That one over there,” he said, pointing to a mountain on the opposite side of the valley. “You’ll have to look sharp if you want to catch him before he reaches the frontier. He’s a slippery devil. You know what you’re looking for? Big burly fellow, broad shoulders, like me.”

* I started up the engine and taxied over to him. He was

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still talking. In case he was describing me now, I revved up the engine till it was loud enough to swamp his words. With my ill-fitting uniform and my slit cap, I was not anxious to be stared at.

Helpmann gave up then and jumped into the car. I let in the clutch too suddenly, nearly shooting him out again, and off we went in a cloud of dust.

"Ah, Peter, these troops — these mag-nee-fi-cent troops! See how they fly — like planes catapulted from an aircraft carrier. They search the mountain already. All night they will be looking for me, all night."

"You left me out of it, I hope."

"Impossible."

I gave the accelerator a kick.

"You were the chief attraction, my friend. I told them I'd pumped you dry, found out all I wanted, and left you to the tender mercies of de Kretser. And I said that, like a sensible soldier, he blew you up in the chapel — pfutt! — so."

"Supposing they go there now and check up?"

"I've seen to that, too. Told them to keep clear of the chapel and run after *me*. I'm not a complete imbecile, Peter."

I ought to have been more grateful for Helpmann's presence of mind and more elated by our success than I was. But I could think only of the Mendls, my mind full of the gloomiest forebodings. De Kretser had destroyed their home and, when I asked about them, had reminded me of the punishment for sheltering spies. I knew very well what that was and I dreaded the thought of what we should find.

I drove fast, too fast for the steep and twisty road that

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ribboned its way down to the main valley. Even Helpmann's nerve was disturbed, and after a couple of skids on the wet surface — for a steady drizzle had set in, to last for the rest of the day — he insisted on taking over the wheel.

We turned left at Bartok when we reached the main valley, taking the broad highroad that followed the railway as far as Slenov, where we stopped to buy a paper. The news was good. The allied offensive was taking shape and on the southern front the enemy had been halted. In Tellyria the government had resigned and the first act of the new cabinet had been to pledge support to the allies. This meant that if we could escape over the Silvanian Alps into Tellyria, we should not be interned. It was excellent news, and no less welcome because we had been expecting it for some time.

After Slenov we did not stop at all, except when refugees jammed the road. Every three or four miles we came across a crowd of them, with their bundles and their cheap suitcases, crawling and sprawling over the road and over the fields on either side, all heading westwards. They did not beg or ask us for anything, but stood and stared at us as we slowly carved a way through, their eyes devouring us with a sort of cowed hatred. On one occasion a crowd that had seemed to us from a distance to be moving so slowly as to be almost at a standstill, was suddenly galvanized into movement as soon as they sighted our uniforms, scattering into the fields like frightened sheep. I suppose experience had taught them to expect to be mowed down. But most of the refugees were dumb and apathetic, drifting aimlessly along, of no more account than insects. They would still be on

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the road next week and the week after. And when they reached the frontier they would be turned back.

If we had turned at Riok into the Karadov and Kolenso valley, we should no doubt have made faster progress and reached the farm in the early afternoon. But we chose the long way round, turning left at the next junction and approaching Kolenso by way of the East Radra valley. We did not wish to run the risk of being recognized.

At tea-time we stopped for an hour at an inn and had a good meal, with soup and meat and Silvanian cheese and a bottle of wine each. Being impatient to find out about the Mendls, I had not wanted to stop. But Helpmann insisted. "He said we might not get another square meal for days. And he proved to be right about that."

Kolenso was empty of troops. So was Valdec. It looked as if the enemy had abandoned the chase in our valley. As we bumped out of Valdec onto the last lap of the steep, winding road to the Mendls', I leaned out of the car, anxious for a glimpse of the farm. I could not see far ahead because of the drizzle.

"What do you see, Peter?"

"Smoke. There's a great cloud of it behind the pine-wood."

"Anyone about?"

I didn't stay to see. A bullet splintered the wind-screen. Another struck the bonnet and ricocheted off.

Jamming on the brakes, Helpmann swung into the side of the road under shelter of a rock. I pulled him down on to the floor with me. We were safer there till we could see which direction the sniping had come from and whether we were out of range.

We waited five minutes. Nothing happened.

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"I can't make this out," I said. "They've not had time to lay an ambush for us."

"Is there a phone up there?"

"Mendl had the only one, and his place is burnt down."

After a minute or so, Helpmann said, "I'm going to have a look round. Now keep your hair on your head, Peter. You fuss over me as if I was a two year old. If it is enemy sniping, they know better than to shoot at *me*."

Anyone else would have taken some care over how he exposed himself, but Helpmann shot up from the floor like a jack-in-the-box. He stood quite still while he looked around him. You couldn't have wanted a better target. If the sniper had been below us, Helpmann wouldn't have had a hope. Yet he wasn't even trembling. I know, because I was huddled up against his legs.

"He's up on the hill, Peter. The rock's between us and him. Now if I can hold a stick, we make sure. Does this seat open up? Ah, I thought so."

He had turned back the car seat. Underneath was the tool-kit, from which he removed the jack and the long winding handle with it.

"Sit up, Peter. You will not be hit now," he said cheerfully.

He took his cap off and perched it on the end of the handle. Then, shutting the seat again, he stood on it and held up the jack-handle above his head, pushing it gently upwards till the cap projected over the top of the rock.

It was hit almost immediately.

Helpmann pulled down the handle and we examined



Very cautiously, I raised my head

THE LONE SNIPER

the cap. The bullet had struck the edge of the badge and gone clean through.

"First-rate marksman, whoever it is," said Helpmann. "Wonder what the game is."

I had been thinking over Helpmann's remark that if it was an enemy sniper he'd not be likely to pot at him. I had an idea and I told Helpmann. We agreed to act on it.

A couple of minutes later I was on my belly in the ditch, slithering along uphill like a worm. I had changed from de Kretser's uniform and was wearing my own clothes. But I kept the holster and had de Kretser's revolver in my hand. As soon as I was clear of the rock and had reached a part where the road was banked with earth and long grasses, very slowly, very gingerly I slid out of the ditch and wormed my way a yard or two through the grass. If I were to raise my head now, I should be able to look down on the rock and up the hill to where the firing had come from.

I released the safety catch of the revolver. I lay still and counted a hundred. Then, very cautiously, I raised my head and, parting the grasses in front of me, peered ahead.

I could see from the rock to the wood a hundred yards above, where the road looped. There was little cover between, only a single large boulder with a stunted tree beside it. I watched the boulder and the tree.

It was not long before I saw what I was waiting for, a slight movement between trunk and boulder. I saw a brown arm with the shirt rolled back to the elbow, then — for a brief instant — a face peering out towards the rock. It did not stay long enough for me to make sure of a hit.

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But then, I would not have dreamt of shooting. I slipped on the safety catch of the revolver and put it back in the holster. I cupped my hands and called out; "EMIL! EMIL! We've come back!"

Then I stood up and showed myself.



CHAPTER XX

"WE'RE STARTING RIGHT NOW"

I WAS mighty glad to see the boy again and to know that he was safe. He had very nearly killed us, but we soon forgave him that. The bloodthirsty young bounder! Just like Emil to sneak away on his own to pot at the enemy. He had pinched the rifle from one of the soldiers while they were busy hurling grenades into the farm.

Yes, that was where the smoke was coming from. He told us all about it, sitting squashed between us on the car seat, while we drove up the last few furlongs to the farm. As we emerged from the wood, the smell of burning was strong and the wind blew the smoke towards us. We drove slowly into the yard and did not stop until we were up-wind of the smoke.

De Kretser had made a good job of it. The place was a smouldering ruin; the roof had fallen in and only the stone walls — blackened and begrimed — were still standing.

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All the Resistance gear that Josef had been collecting for months and storing in the cellars was destroyed.

"They destroyed the hamlet, too, where the men live," said Emil. "Just because Viktor and Eduard drove you down in the grape wagon."

"You haven't told us about your family, Emil," I said. "Josef, your mother, and the baby — are they safe?"

"Father came back from the mountain as soon as he saw what was happening. It broke his heart to see them destroying the old farm. And the vines, too — yes, they hacked most of them down, the brutes. They took him prisoner and carried him off. Deportation, forced labour — you know the game. God knows when we'll see him again."

"And your mother?"

"She came back, too. But not till de Kretser had gone. I wouldn't let her. I stuck to the reins and wouldn't let go."

"She's safe, then? And baby Maria as well?"

Emil nodded. "I wanted to take them over the frontiér with me — over the mountains."

"Take us to your mother," I said. "I must see her at once."

He led us to one of the outhouses, which had escaped the firing. The windows had been staved in and there was broken glass all over the floor. Madame Mendl was sitting on a heap of sacking, nursing the baby. The priest was there, too, sitting on a sawyer's bench with three boys from the hamlet, and they were all listening to the news on a small portable wireless set.

Helpmann was still in his officer's uniform, so I told him to stay outside with Emil.

"WE'RE STARTING RIGHT NOW"

Then I went in.

The set was on so loud that nobody noticed me till I spoke.

"Sh! This is important news," said the priest without looking up. Madame Mendl's back was to me, and she did not look round.

I felt dreadfully uncomfortable standing there, trying to pick out what the announcer was saying, yet so conscious of all the misery I had caused that I couldn't take in a blessed word.

"Hm, pretty bad down in the south," said the priest, switching the set off.

He looked up at me. There was recognition, but no surprise in his eyes. He came over and shook my hand. "I said you'd come back. I felt it in my bones," he said. "I had a twinge of rheumatism this morning, and whenever that comes I know something pleasant is going to happen."

I did not dare look at Madame Mendl, though I could feel her eyes on me.

"I couldn't leave you like this," I said, "not when I heard what had happened." I stammered out something about it all being my fault, that I wished I'd never met them. I said quite a lot, till Madame Mendl interrupted me.

"Don't blame yourself, Mr. Howarth. We were bound to be caught sooner or later. All that stuff hidden in the cellar. And Josef never told a soul about it, not even his family."

I didn't know what to say to that. I had caused her home to be destroyed and her husband to be taken away from her — perhaps to his death — and she told me I wasn't to blame.

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I asked after Josef — and wished immediately that I hadn't. Her lip quivered as she said, "It is hard to believe he has gone. I still wonder if it is all a dream." And she turned her head away.

"I've come back to help you. I'll never let you down," I said.

Then I went outside with the priest, warning him about Helpmann's disguise.

"Ah, Emil, I see you've captured a Field-Marshal," said the priest, giving the boy a hearty slap on the back.

"I nearly killed him," said Emil.

"We wondered what you were up to. While you're at large with a rifle, nobody's safe, friend or foe. Murderous rascal!" The priest turned to me. "Now, Mr. Howarth, tell us how you escaped. We heard a rumour they'd caught you on the train."

We told him very little. I was keen to help the Mendls, to do what we could for them while time was still on our side. We sat down on a bench in the yard and thrashed things out, while Emil lay on the ground and cleaned the breech of his rifle.

The priest told us that Madame Mendl had been bound over to report to the N.C.O. at Valdec twice a week. She had refused to do it. If she didn't go tomorrow they'd come for her — and one didn't need to be told what that meant. Friends had offered to look after her and the baby, but what with the refugees and the billeted soldiers and the shortage of food everyone had his share of troubles without taking on any more — that's how Madame Mendl looked at it. She couldn't bear to hang on here in the valley after what had happened to Josef and their home.

"WE'RE STARTING RIGHT NOW"

"Would she come with us, over the mountains?" I asked.

"What, with that baby? It's a terrible risk. The Devil's Kitchen — that's the pass into Tellyria — is over ten thousand feet and difficult to find. I don't like the idea." He sat drumming his clogs uneasily on the ground.

But I knew that was our only hope. I had been thinking of it, planning it all the while as we drove up in the wolf-cub. She would be safe in Tellyria, she would find food and rest and all the friends she needed — if only we could get her there.

"Tell me exactly what we're up against," I said. "I know the pass in the next valley — it's not a difficult one, though steep on the other side."

"The Devil's Kitchen is a couple of thousand feet higher, above the summer snow line. Some of the lower cliffs are pretty giddy, more of a climb than a scramble. Madame Mendl is not exactly the build for a mountaineer — and with that baby! The idea's crazy. It can be hell up there in a storm. And the weather report is none too encouraging — sleet and snow."

I spread out the map on the ground and asked him how long he thought it would take us.

"Fourteen or fifteen hours to the pass, if all goes well. I don't know what lies beyond that."

"Contours are wider on the Tellyrian side. And there's a mountain hut at eight thousand. I'm sure we can make it."

"God help you if you get chased. With a patrol on your tail, you wouldn't have a hope."

I asked him to come with us. At first he refused, saying he had a job with the Resistance. But he finally agreed to come part of the way.

THERE'S NO ESCAPE

It remained for me now to persuade the rest of the party. Emil, of course, needed no persuasion at all. From the moment I'd mentioned the idea, he had been bubbling over with enthusiasm. I believe he had some idea of joining the Tellyrian army and marching in at their head to liberate his country. As for Helpmann, if there had been an enemy battalion on the frontier waiting for us, he would not have refused. I was afraid that my real difficulty would be to persuade Madame Mendl. To my surprise she did not hesitate. She told me she had a sister in Tellyria married to a school-teacher, and if she could go to her till the end of the war that would be the happiest solution to her problem.

The rest of the evening was spent in making preparations. I planned to start at 4.30 a.m. next morning, an hour before dawn, and to take the wolf-cub as far as we could. Tough little car that she was, she was no match for the five of us and all our rucksacks as well. So the priest volunteered to drive Emil and the rucksacks up that night as far as the pasturage. Emil was mad keen to take his rifle "to ward off an attack from the rear", as he put it, but the priest managed to persuade him that the needs of the Resistance, who were desperately short of rifles, were greater than ours. We all agreed that it would only be a hindrance.

Madame Mendl cooked some supper for us on a primus, but we were too excited to eat much. As soon as it was over she retired to bed with the baby, to get as much rest as possible before our early start. A sort of trestle bed with a straw palliasse had been rigged up for her at one end of the outhouse.

The priest returned not long after dark, having

"WE'RE STARTING RIGHT NOW"

succeeded in taking Emil and the baggage well beyond the pasturage, almost to the end of the timber line. He had found a dry place for the boy to sleep, under the shelter of a rock and out of the rain.

After making final preparations, we retired to the pile of straw in the woodshed where the three of us were to spend the night. We lay down fully dressed except for our boots, which we laid ready beside us. What with the drumming of the rain on the roof and the whimpering of the baby in the outhouse, it was a long time before I fell asleep.

I was woken by the shining of a torch in my face and the touch of a rough hand on my shoulder.

"Who's that?" I cried, and my fingers reached for my revolver.

A deep voice that I did not recognize answered me. "I'm looking for the priest. Is he here?"

The priest was awake by now. "What is it, Rudolf?" he said.

"D'you know anything about an enemy officer and a sergeant in a wolf-cub?"

"Yes. You've just woken the sergeant, and the elephantine snores you can hear in the straw beside me come from the officer. Don't be alarmed." And he explained who we were. He also explained to us that Rudolf was the chemist at Valdec, a member of the Resistance.

"I'm glad I came," said Rudolf. "There have been telephone calls during the night to most of the inns and police stations in the valley, and in the East Radra valley as well. They wanted to know if you'd come this way."

"So the chase has begun," I said.

"They're not on to you yet, sir," said Rudolf. "The

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boys give nothing away. They say anything that comes into their heads."

"Where were the calls from?" said the priest.

"Bartok."

"Did you know anything about this?"

"Only what you told us. The boys thought it pretty fishy being rung up after one o'clock in the morning. Most of them rang through to me at once to tell me."

I glanced at my watch. It was just after three o'clock.

"We're starting right now," I said. "Wake up, Helpmann."

There was no reply from that gentleman, except snores — more monstrous than ever. I threw a boot at him.

It hit something pretty solid to judge from the thud, and a sleepy voice murmured, "Ach, more trouble! The roof falls in."

"We're starting right now," I repeated.

I retrieved my boot from beside his head, and while I was putting it on explained to him what had happened.

All he said was, "What would I not give for a nice cup of steaming hot cocoa? What a pity we lose that thermos, Peter!"



CHAPTER XXI

HELPMANN TRUE TO FORM

It was still dark when we drove out of the yard and onto the mountain trail. There was a cold wind and a drizzling rain from which the canvas roof only partly protected us. What a squash it was inside the car! Madame Mendl, with the baby wrapped in shawls and clasped tightly to her, was wedged between me and the priest, who was driving. Helpmann occupied the luggage space behind, there being no back seat. Protected by us from the wind and rain, I think he had the best of the bargain. I did not envy the priest his job. The headlights were poor, while the track, which wound up in zigzags through the wood, was steep and full of ruts. We were continually bounced and jerked about, and it was no wonder that the baby howled most of the time.

I reckoned we had a good start. If the enemy were to chase us, they would hardly dare to start before dawn. As the priest remarked, they knew the Resistance too

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well to trust themselves to so risky a move. "And depend upon it, if they do come they'll be foot-slogging it most of the way. I've told Rudolf to scatter puncture pins over the road, and to picket the woods with snipers as well."

When we came out into the open pasture, the first grey light of dawn was already in the sky. We had climbed out of the rain, but the wind was colder, sweeping bitterly across the unbroken pasture. The mountain tops were hidden in thick cloud. I could see we were in for a day of dirty weather.

Emil heard us coming and was already waiting for us, with the rucksacks stacked ready.

"Well, that's as far as we're taking the car," said the priest, switching off the ignition.

"No," said Emil. "We can take it up the ravine. I've been scouting ahead, and it's not bad going."

We folded back the roof and smothered Helpmann with the rucksacks. Emil jumped on to the running board and we were off again.

But not for very far. The going was terribly rough — shale and stones everywhere, and sometimes a perilous squeeze to avoid being pitched into the torrent. We were grinding slowly along under an overhanging rock when one of the front wheels buckled against a boulder, all but tipping us over sideways, and that was the end.

We spilled ourselves out.

"I'm going to carry Maria," said Emil, and he reached out for her.

"Ssh! She's asleep, dear. Leave her to me," his mother said.

"I've made a nest for her in my rucksack. It's soft,

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like a bed. You'll need your strength for the climb, mother."

"You'd better leave her to me, Emil," I said. "I've thought all this out."

The boy turned on me with blazing eyes. "I'm going to carry her. You shall not touch her," he shouted.

We let him have his way, though at the time I was very doubtful. Emil had his own way too often. But, as it turned out, we had done the right thing. From now on, whatever danger we were in, he looked after her with tireless devotion. Perhaps he felt that his father's mantle had fallen upon him and that he was responsible for the family now.

So baby Maria snuggled down into the top of Emil's rucksack. And except for when she was taken out at feeding times, there she remained, sheltered from the wind and weather and for much of the time sleeping peacefully, quite unconscious of the perils we were going through.

The torrent was not very wide, now we were nearer to the glacier waters. We were able to cross it a little higher up and soon to leave it behind altogether.

When we came to a suitable place out of the wind, we stopped for breakfast, sheltered by a great rock. We were some way above the tree-line and could see right down into the valley as far as Valdec, though the farm and hamlet were hidden by trees. The heights were still covered by heavy clouds, which did not look like clearing. I was thankful we had the priest to guide us. Soon we should strike into cloud ourselves.

Considering all things, we made reasonably good going, though Madame Mendl slowed us down a lot.

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Heights made her giddy, so that whenever the way was steep she needed assistance — a pull from me in front and a push from Helpmann behind. But she was plucky and did not make a fuss.

We were half way up the first rock escarpment — it was about eleven o'clock — when we heard the sound of firing far down in the valley below. Three sharp shots rang out in succession, splitting the hills with their echoes.

"Good," said the priest. "That's what I've been waiting for. It's the signal the enemy are on our tails. I told Rudolf to fire when — "

"I don't call that good news," said Madame Mendl, panting to get her breath back.

"They'll not catch us now. We've made a third of the distance already."

"Only a third? Is that all we've done?" she wailed. "I shall never keep it up."

"Well, we can slacken the pace if you want to. They'll never catch us. Look at the clouds above. We're almost up to them, and even if they did put a spurt on, they'd never find us up there."

Madame Mendl was reassured and, as soon as she had recovered her breath, returned to the climbing. The priest was right. They would never catch us now. We had only the weather to contend with, and from my experience of mountains I knew it would be a struggle needing all our resources.

Our confidence did not last long. Soon another sound troubled us — an ominous buzzing in the distance. Helpmann and I had heard it before and we knew what it was before we looked. The autogyro again! It was difficult to spot at first, for it was well below us, its squat body

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camouflaged against the tree tops, and flying so low that it barely cleared them. On it came towards us, exploring the valley in broad, sweeping curves, slowly, relentlessly. My heart sank to think how in a matter of minutes it was covering ground that took us hours to negotiate.

I looked up at the priest, who was resting against a rock some twenty feet above me. There was no mistaking the worry on his face. But he spoke calmly enough.

"We're very exposed here. But there's cover higher up, if we can make it in time. Mind, Emil — there's an awkward boulder just here — lean outwards and tread firmly, that's right. Helpmann, Howarth, give the lady a hand."

She was very pale and her arm was shaking as I helped her. Part of her trouble was that she would keep her eyes on Emil's rucksack, instead of on her feet, and if he moved too hurriedly or took any risk she called out to him to mind what he was doing.

We scrambled on in breathless haste. It did not help to hear the buzzing growing louder and louder every minute. But she was taking long sweeping curves, and we managed to gain the shelter of some large boulders before she was near enough to spot us.

"A good thing the car packed up where it did," said Emil, taking off his rucksack and laying it very gently on the flat rock. "Leave baby alone, mother. She's still asleep. She'll start crying when she wants the bottle."

"What's that about the car packing up?" said Helpmann.

"It packed up under that overhanging boulder, don't you remember?" said Emil. "They won't spot her from the autogyro now."

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"She's over the brow there, going to try the next valley," said the priest joyfully. He was watching through his binoculars.

"Which means they can't be certain about our route," I said.

"Emil, baby's too hot in there," said Madame Mendl. "Look, you've laced it at the top and there's no air at all getting in. Poor thing, she must be suffocating."

"Nonsense, mother. The opening's as big as a saucer. She's as happy as a robin in her nest. But still, if it'll set your mind at rest — " Very carefully, so as not to wake her, he undid the lacing a little further.

"Can't we go on now?" said Helpmann, who had already left the shelter of the boulder and was straining to be off.

"Not if I know it," I said, making a grab at him. "You stick along back here. I've not forgotten what happened on the Plekno Ridge — and on the station bridge too. You're too clever at giving the show away."

"Look, she's coming back again!" said Emil, as the autogyro skimmed over the ridge. She was about on a level with us now and heading straight towards us.

"Hide yourselves, everyone!" said the priest.

I pulled Helpmann down beside me and clung fast to him.

The throbbing of the engine grew louder and louder. I felt that she was right on top of us now, that she must strike into the rock. Then the climax passed and the throbbing eased, as she slid away to the west.

"She took it pretty close," said the priest, who had been watching from his hiding place all the time. "Risky in a wind like this."



I felt that she was right on top of us now

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"Must be a daring pilot," said Emil.

"Did you see who was aboard?" I asked.

"Three and the pilot, I think."

"What! As many as that! I wonder what the game is."

"She's rising vertically now," said the priest. He was standing up again, watching through his binoculars.

"She'll hit the clouds in a minute," said Emil.

"That is a *stupid* thing to do," said Helpmann. "What do they think they see in a fog?"

"Perhaps they've got infra red eyes," said Emil.

"She's in the cloud now. Imbeciles, im-be-ciles!" said Helpmann.

We couldn't see her any more, though we could still hear the engine.

"Hope they hit a rock," said Emil, and he listened intently for the crash. I've never seen such an expectant look on anyone's face. I could just imagine his howls of delight if the crash came.

We were all gazing up at the place where the autogyro had disappeared, when suddenly Madame Mendl cried, "Look out!"

Emil put his hands over his head. I think he was expecting the autogyro to tumble in pieces out of the sky. But Madame Mendl was not referring to anything up there. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something green slide off the shelf of rock where we were standing and bounce away down the mountain. It was one of the rucksacks.

For a ghastly moment I thought it was the one with the baby in. Then a little soft whimpering at my side reassured me. Madame Mendl had instinctively flung her arms round the rucksack and Maria had woken.

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"Sorry, my fault," said Helpmann apologetically. "I kick it over by mistake. I am staring up into the cloud —"

"Dreaming about cocoa," put in Emil.

"Indeed, no such thing, my boy. I look for the plane, and —"

I did not listen to his explanation but peered anxiously over the edge. Luckily the rock was not particularly steep here and the rucksack had come to rest in a crack some eighty or a hundred feet below. But its bright green was horribly conspicuous against the grey rock. It was almost as bad as if he had dropped his red scarf.

"Whose is it?" asked the priest.

"Mine," said Helpmann. "I go down to fetch it, at once. At once. It has all my treasures, my re-searches, my model, my —"

"Don't be a fool," I said.

"Peter, you keep your finger from poking in my pie. *I . . . go . . . down.*"

Already he was picking his way down among the broken rocks, maddeningly slowly, it seemed to me. We watched him apprehensively, praying that the autogyro would stay in the cloud.

He got there safely, retrieved the rucksack and was clambering up again when the droning of the engine grew louder. This did not worry him at all, for he paused to pluck a saxifrage and stick it in his buttonhole. He was half way up as the autogyro popped out of the cloud.

"For God's sake stand still!" I shouted. "Turn yourself into a rock!"

Under any other circumstances the sight of the massive, cumbersome Helpmann trying to curl up into some semblance of a rock would have been laughable. But

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none of us felt like laughing now. He had hooped himself over the green rucksack, only to expose the red scarf round his neck — and that was far more dangerous.

I called out to him to cover his neck, but the wind carried my voice away.

Fortune was kind to us. The autogyro was well to the east and already heading back down-valley. When she was about half a mile away, she banked steeply to the left and disappeared over the ridge into the next valley.

Helpmann was back safely. "I have it, I have it!" he cried, waving the rucksack excitedly. "Ach, my friends, I am the cat's wheeskers!"

"We'd better get moving," said the priest. "The rocks aren't difficult here. Keep behind me, Emil. Helpmann, please stay with Madame Mendl. Howarth, I'd like a word with you."

He waited till we were some yards ahead of the others. Then he said, "I don't like the look of it at all. I think the pilot means to return and land those men."

"Where?"

"Up above us. There's a hollow scooped into the mountain and a tarn too. It's quite flat on one side."

"They couldn't do it in this mist. It would be suicide."

"The mist is rising," said the priest.

I looked and saw that he was right. The wind was blowing it aslant the rock-face, and although it hung in thick festoons in the hollow, the eastern side was almost clear.

"Don't say anything to the others," said the priest.

I glanced back at them. Emil was climbing smoothly and confidently, with a wonderful sense of balance for such a youngster. What a contrast to his mother,

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struggling bravely yet so clumsily behind him. She looked appallingly tired, and I wondered if we should ever get her to the pass.

As we reached the top of the escarpment, we were caught up in the mist, a thick wet blanket of it, swirling in the wind about us.

"Are we really and truly at the top?" panted Madame Mendl. She swept her hair, beaded with cloud moisture, from her eyes and gazed imploringly at the priest.

"Yes, we're really at the top," he said reassuringly. "And we'll be out of the mist in a minute. It's blowing away in rags — it's not solid, you know."

"We'll be out of the wind too," I said.

Almost at once the wind dropped, telling us, though we could not yet see it, that we were in a hollow. The rock was almost level, though rough and crumbly underfoot.

"I could just do with a nice armchair in front of the fire," said Madame Mendl. "D'you think we could rest a minute? Baby's crying again and she wants her bottle."

"Five minutes," said the priest, but I could see that he did not want to stop.

The mist blew over while we were resting there. For the first time we saw what lay ahead of us. It was an awe-inspiring sight. All round us towering black cliffs hemmed us in. In the hollow was a little lake. And above us, still hidden by the mist, were the snow-covered peaks.

"Beautiful, beau-ti-ful in-deed!" exclaimed Helpmann.

"Which is the pass?" said Emil.

"Beyond the cliff. You can't see it yet," said the priest.

Another blanket of mist, swirling up from below,

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swallowed us and once more everything was blotted out.

"We must hurry now," said the priest. And we started off.

We had not gone more than a few paces when Madame Mendl fell. I helped her up, but she could not put her right foot to the ground without a stab of pain. Examining her ankle, I saw she had given it a nasty wrench. It was swelling up already and I had a job to get the boot off.

"You'd better all go on," she said.

"Nonsense," I said. "I'll fix it for you right now."

I was going to use my handkerchief for a bandage, but Helpmann offered me his scarf. Tearing it into strips, I made a good long bandage of it and bound the ankle as firmly as I could. With a struggle I got the boot on again.

She limped along like an old, broken soldier, wincing with pain. Helpmann and I gave her some support so as to take the weight off the foot.

Somehow we got to the tarn. There was the ruin of an old wooden hut close by, and she sat down on a stone outside.

She said she couldn't go on and that we must leave her and save ourselves while we could. She would follow on later.

I took the priest aside and we discussed the matter. I said she was exhausted and that I would stay with her till she could go on. He suggested staying with her himself and taking her back home in the morning. That would never do, for he would be shot for helping us escape. Then we discussed it altogether and it was agreed that my plan was the more suitable.

The priest left me full instructions about the route and

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gave me some advice and a rough sketch map. I thanked him for all he had done for us. Then, after giving us his blessing, he and Emil and Helpmann set off again towards the pass.

I watched them disappear into the mist, feeling very heavy at heart. Madame Mendl was terribly upset, but she did not give way to her pent up feelings till they were out of hearing.

I made her as comfortable as possible on the floor of the hut, gave her tea from the thermos and some food to eat. I listened to her patiently as she poured out her anxieties for her husband and the children. When she was quieter and I had comforted her as well as I could, I went outside.

The mist had lifted from part of the cliff now, though it still clung to the hollow in cotton wool puffs. I watched the puffs break up and trail away in thin pale streamers. Three figures emerged, tiny against the towering black cliffs, and began to climb slowly. Even at this distance I could see the path quite clearly marked.

Then the autogyro returned. I could not see her yet, but there was no mistaking the steady, menacing drone that grew louder and louder as she came nearer to us. As the circle of cliffs caught the echo, the noise became deafening, ear-splitting, and it seemed as if we were trapped in the heart of a thunder-storm. Above my head a cloud parted and the machine dropped out. I stood there and watched, fascinated, while it dropped down and down and down, dangling like a spider on a thread. Suddenly remembering that I was exposed, I ran for the shelter of the hut.



CHAPTER XXII

A CLOSE SHAVE

THROUGH a broken wall-board I watched her make a perfect three-point landing, as neat and painless as if she had lighted on a tennis court. He must have been a rare pilot to have managed that, for the ground was for the most part murderously uneven and everywhere strewn with stones. He chose the flattest bit, just to the right of the tarn, a bare hundred yards from the ruin where we were hiding. And we were directly on the path between him and the rest of our party! How could we escape discovery now?

Madame Mendl told me to leave her and make my escape as best I could. There was, she said, just a chance of my slipping them, but for the two of us it was quite hopeless. I beckoned to her to be quiet, as the engine had stopped and the mountains, that had just now been splitting with the roar, were now eerily silent.

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Some soldiers leapt out of the cabin door — three of them. The last, and the shortest, of the three was de Kretser. He stumbled and fell on his face, but picked himself up at once and smacked the dirt off his uniform with self-conscious dignity.

For a few moments they talked together in a group, occasionally addressing a remark to the cabin door. I assumed that the pilot was still aboard, though I could not actually see him. Then the group broke up, one of the men walking back towards the rock escarpment we had climbed, while de Kretser and the other began to examine the cliffs above through binoculars.

There was some excitement when they sighted our party. De Kretser called the third soldier back and, after a brief consultation with the others and some checking up with the map, the three of them set off at a brisk pace in our direction.

I made my plans as coolly as I could. I got Madame Mendl to lie on the floor, full length against the wall, so that if de Kretser glanced in without entering she would probably escape discovery. As for me, I knelt by a hole in the wall where one of the boards had rotted away. Then I took out my revolver and waited. I reckoned that if they came direct and passed the hut where I expected them to, I should have no difficulty in picking them off.

Left, right! Left, right! I could hear the march of their footsteps crisp and regular on the stony ground. Left, right! Left, right! Nearer and nearer. I pressed one shoulder to the wall, levelled my revolver, and when all three were well in sight took careful aim at de Kretser and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. I did not even hear the click of the

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firing pin. I tried again, with no result. I tried to turn the revolving chamber, but it would not budge. I must have banged it against a rock during the climb, for it had buckled and, when I examined the firing pin, I found it bent. And now the soldiers had passed by and I had missed my chance. It seemed cruel luck.

"Halt!" cried de Kretser.

In a sweat of fear I slid to the floor and lay against the skirting board, hardly daring to breathe.

"There were three of them just now. I see only two," said de Kretser. "Give me the glasses."

Pause.

"Ah, there he is — well over to the left. The priest, I think. Looking out the route."

A longer pause. Then:

"What's made him shift over there? It's right off the direct route to the pass."

"Perhaps it's smoother that way. Remember, the idiots have got a baby with them," said one of the soldiers.

"They're all moving over now," said the other.

"Map!" said de Kretser.

A rustling of paper. Then, from de Kretser:

"Hold it still, man! In this wind, how do you expect me to —"

"We might take it in the hut, sergeant, and spread it out. There's no wind in there."

De Kretser grunted.

"Come on," he said.

How their nailed boots grated and scrunched on the stony ground as they shuffled over to the hut, towards us. Madame Mendl gave a little gasp. I beckoned

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to her to be quiet. Not that it could make much difference now, for in a matter of seconds we should be discovered.

Those few seconds while they were moving over seemed hours of agony, and I thought nothing could save us. One of the soldiers had actually kicked at the door when de Kretser said: "It's plenty sheltered here under the wall, Kepler. And we can see the rock from here as well. Now, let's spread it out. Vondras, keep an eye on the climbers."

Some muttering while they studied the map.

Then de Kretser said: "They've gone for the easier ground. If we climb direct, we'll come out here under the Sentinel and get to the pass before them. It's half the distance."

"But damnably steep," said Kepler. "And there seems to be a snowfield of sorts under the Sentinel."

"Snow's easy to manage," said de Kretser.

"The captain warned us against cutting across there. Said something about summer avalanches."

"Mere superstition. What does *he* know about climbing? I've had fifty times his experience. Leave it to me, Kepler, leave it to me."

"There's only one of them in sight now," said Vondras. "It's the big fellow."

"Should be five of them altogether," said Kepler. "Funny we've only seen three. Wonder what's happened to the other two?"

"Probably fallen off and killed themselves," said de Kretser. "The old girl's top-heavy, you know. No more use than a cow on ground like this."

This was thought to be funny, and they all laughed.

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"Hell of a joke if they were hiding in this here hut," said Kepler.

We did not think it quite such a joke as they did.

"Take it from me, we'd be dead meat by now if they were," said de Kretser. "That Englishman, he may be mad, but he's got guts, the guts of the devil . . . Well, boys, it's time we were on the move. What's the time? Four o'clock? It'll be all we can manage to make the pass before dark."

They folded up the map and marched off. We could not help smiling at the flattering references they had made to us.

When they had gone, I undid the bandage and examined Madame Mendl's ankle. It was stiff and swollen, but not badly so. I gave it a thorough massaging, then bound it up again. At a pinch she might have walked on it now, but she was still suffering from exhaustion and strain. It would be better to rest it overnight. In any case it would hardly have been wise to leave our hiding place while de Kretser was in sight.

At the back of my mind there was a vague plan to capture the autogyro and finish the rest of our journey in comfort. Not that I had the faintest idea of how to pilot one myself. But a frightened man will do anything at the point of a revolver, and, useless as mine was, I might try a bluff. The pilot was stretching his legs by the tarn. I rather hoped he would come over to the hut, for I reckoned I would be a match for him here.

But he never strayed more than forty or fifty yards from the machine. Much to my disappointment, soon after five he climbed into the cabin and flew away—presumably after a signal from de Kretser. Once more

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the rocks were split with the roar of the engine. Away went the plane, southwards, back to the valley. And again we had the mountains to ourselves.

I stood outside and watched the three soldiers, grey specks against the dark rock, till they were out of sight. I made a careful note of their route. It was well to the right of the place where I had last seen our own party.

Then I returned to the hut, where Madame Mendl had laid out a meal on the floor. We drank the rest of the tea from the thermos and polished off half the food we had kept with us, leaving the rest till morning.



CHAPTER XXIII

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PASS

WE timed our start for an hour before dawn, reckoning that it would take us the best part of an hour to reach the foot of the cliff. There being some risk of our being spotted from the top, it was important for us to get this bit over while it was still dark.

The cheerless desolation of that place! The cliffs, pressing in upon us from three sides, were so cold and dark and overpowering that I felt we had been swallowed by an enormous cavern. Dawn would lift the roof off, but we still had the walls to scale.

The path — we followed the priest's sketch map — was not as hard as it looked, and Madame Mendl tackled it splendidly in spite of the limp. I'm sure her real trouble had been not the ahkle but exhaustion, and the long rest had cured that. Of course she was worried about the baby, but I told her about the cave the priest had marked on the map. It was at the foot of Silver Peak, and he

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proposed to spend the night there if there was no chance of making the pass.

Soon after eight o'clock we scrambled over the rim of the wall on to the broad final slope which led to the Devil's Kitchen — out of the shadows into the sun. The sight that met our eyes took my breath away — all the snow-capped peaks about us, the Sentinel's rocky tower with its cap-feather of snow, the glistening slopes of Silver Peak, and the long chain of frontier mountains stretching away into the hazy blue distance. Far below lay the valley, asleep under a soft eiderdown of cloud.

"Which is the frontier pass?" Madame Mendl asked.

I pointed to the dark gash between the Sentinel and Silver Peak.

"Why, it looks almost as if you could touch it, it's so near. I feel sure they must have crossed yesterday. I do hope so," she said.

"The snow's lying low for the time of year," I said. "Looks to me like a fresh fall, and a heavy one too. But we'll see directly."

"D'you think they got over safely?"

I was scanning the mountain for a sight of one of the two parties, but I could see no sign of either. The whole scene was so huge, so remote and lonely, that it seemed as if nobody had been here before. Yet I knew that somewhere, perhaps quite near, our friends were waiting for us. De Kretser's party too could not be far away.

We picked up footmarks at the edge of the snow and were able to identify them, from the nail patterns, as belonging to our party. The snow grew deeper and thicker as we went on — it must have been falling for days — but

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we did not sink deep or flounder, for the sun had not yet melted the hard crust of the night's freezing. It would not be long before it did. To gain the pass was not going to be as easy as Madame Mendl expected. The tracks were leading westwards, away from the frontier.

I was just beginning to wonder if the priest had changed his plans when I heard a low whistle. I looked up and saw someone waving to us, high up on a rock. It was the priest.

I waved back. Madame Mendl shouted with joy.

We hurried on, still following the footmarks. The whistle pulled us up. The priest was waving to us to cut across the snow straight towards the foot of the precipitous rock where he was standing.

When we came closer, the whole rock face changed. What had looked like an unbroken precipice turned out to be three jagged faces, the centre one recessed. At the base of the recess, half hidden by a knob of rock, was the cave.

Emil shot out of the cave, as if from a catapult, and came bounding over the snow to meet us. His face was radiant, exactly as I had seen it at our first meeting, after he had outwitted de Kretser.

"They made me stay in here," he said excitedly. "I wanted to come and meet you. Helpmann would have let me, but the priest — well, you know what priests are like. Yes, yes, mother, Maria is fine. I fetched snow for her and boiled it on the primus, then mixed in the milk powder myself. She drank it all up at each feed — every drop — and she's not done that for nearly a week. No, she didn't sleep the *whole* night through, but she cried very little and she's fast asleep now. On the ground?

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Of course not, mother. She's in the rucksack, wrapped in your shawl. Come and see."

It was just as he said. The rucksack was on its back, the tongue hinged over and padded to make a pillow. Only Maria's head was visible, and she was sleeping as blissfully as if she had been in her cot at home.

"Really, we'll have to make a nursemaid of you, Emil," said his mother.

Emil pouted. But his mother didn't see, for she was kneeling down and bending over Maria.

Then the priest joined us. He was as pleased to see us and almost as excited as Emil. He pressed me for details about the soldiers. I told him all about the route they had taken up the rock face, and he kept saying "good", "excellent", "just right" all the time. When I'd finished he said: "Rubbish about it being a short cut. They'll never climb the Bastion with all the gear they're carrying. They'll have to go east, right out of their route, then west higher up if they want to get to the pass."

"Then you don't think they got there last night?"

"They'll not be there before we are, Howarth. I'll bet my boots they won't. You see, they've got to cross the snowfield under the Sentinel."

"Bad for avalanches, isn't it?"

"I don't know anywhere more treacherous at this time of year. Come on, boys. We're going to make a race of it."

I glanced at Helpmann. He was lying comfortably on the floor of the cave, scribbling furiously at a calculation in his notes. His boots lay beside him. For the second time in my career I threw one at him.

"Ach, it goes — the pencil from my hand, the precious

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figures from my head. Phil-ist-ine!" he growled. "It is the first time I sit down quietly for months. The first time for *months*. Peter, I roll you down the mountain for this."

He lumbered to his feet and came padding after me in his socks over the snow, like a great bear. But he soon got tired and flopped down, panting for breath. He sat there, putting on his boots slowly, while the rest of us got ready for the march. He was last off the mark as usual.

"Where are my snow-glasses? I do not find them," he shouted, soon after we had started. "I look in my rucksack inside and out, then inside and out again. Peter, you steal them."

"They're on your cap," I said. "Imbecile!"

Yes, we certainly needed our snow-glasses, for the snow was dazzling. If you were without them long, your eyes felt as if they were being pricked by splinters of glass. The actual climbing would not have been much harder than an uphill walk were it not for the snow. The sun was melting it already, and we were sinking ankle-deep and sometimes calf-deep — an exhausting business when you're not used to it.

Rounding the rocky base of Silver Peak, we came into full view of the Devil's Kitchen, the Sentinel just beyond, and the treacherous snowfield below.

"I can see Tellyria. Hurray, we're nearly there!" cried Emil joyfully.

"I hope you're right, but it doesn't do to be sure too soon," said the priest. "Hello, what was that?"

There was a sudden clap, then a rumble of thunder. While the echo was volleying from mountain to mountain, we saw a small white cloud spill itself from a gulley on the

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Sentinel and roll down the snowfield, puffing itself bigger and bigger every moment. It was like a gigantic mushroom now, hiding most of the field, gradually sinking into itself and evaporating, till there was only a sprinkle of powder left.

"Well, Emil, now you know what an avalanche looks like," said the priest.

"I've seen plenty before," said Emil.

"It's goodbye for ever to anyone caught in that," said the priest.

"There won't be an avalanche where we are, on this side of the mountain?" asked Madame Mendl anxiously.

"If there is, Helpmann will hold it up till we've gone by," I said.

The snowfield was quite still now. Except for a tongue-shaped unevenness in the middle, you wouldn't have known that anything had happened.

To avoid the deep snow we climbed up a little to the fringe of rocks, where the going was rougher but firmer. From time to time we stopped to feed Maria or take a bite ourselves, and while we were resting the priest searched the mountainside with his glasses for signs of de Kretser.

Not a sign, not a sound anywhere.

Every step brought us nearer to the Devil's Kitchen, to the point of the V where our route and the soldiers' route must meet.

"Do you think they're waiting for us in the Devil's Kitchen?" said Emil, as if he hoped they were.

"What a question!" said the priest.

But I could tell he was anxious. Emil had voiced the fear in all our minds. If they had reached the pass, then we hadn't a ghost of a chance. It was so deep and narrow



An Avalanche

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that three armed men could have their way with fifty.

We plodded on in silence, each of us feeling the tension, conscious that the climax of our drama was approaching.

Then suddenly the tension broke.

We were resting, almost on a level with the summit of the snowfield opposite. Madame Mendl was nursing the baby and singing softly to her, for she had been fretful for the last hour. Emil was throwing snowballs at Helpmann. The priest was busy with his glasses, searching the mountain. I was searching too. At the base of the Sentinel, right opposite, I saw a movement. I looked again. Yes, it was the figure of a man, half blurred against the background. Before I could say anything, a rifle shot rang out. The echo against the mountains was ear-splitting.

Madame Mendl cried out.

"At the foot of the Sentinel!" I shouted.

The priest told us to take cover. I ran to Madame Mendl to take the baby, but Emil had done so already and was running for the cover of a rock just behind.

Another shot rang out, and I heard the bullet ricochet off a rock.

"I've picked them up," said the priest, "all three." He was lying full length in a dip in the snow, his glasses to his eyes.

Helpmann and I had each seized one of Madame Mendl's arms and were dragging her to cover. We had hardly got her to safety when another shot rang out.

We both lay flat on the ground, for the rock was not big enough to shelter all of us.

"For God's sake keep your head down and don't move an inch," I told her. "You too, Emil."

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I wondered if the priest was as safe as he thought he was. From above, the dip looked very shallow indeed. I called out to him.

He answered me calmly, still watching through his glasses. "They'll not hit me, I'm hardly showing at all. They're barely within range. Don't worry yourselves — they can't get round the base of the Sentinel without descending on to the snowfield. They'll have to cross the gulley where the avalanche fell."

Another shot rang out.

About twenty yards away there was a rock big enough to shelter three of us. After making certain the family was safe, I slithered towards it, telling Helpmann to follow.

There were several shots, but none of them very near. Half way along I glanced down at the priest and was relieved to see he had ducked his head and was lying quite still.

More shots, one after the other like a thunder clap.

But we were safe now, behind a great toad-shaped rock stout enough to blunt a million bullets.

"Very comfortable indeed," said Helpmann, who had found a piece of the rock nicely curved to fit his back. "I continue now with my calculation. I think we are detained for some time. Do not disturb me." And fishing out a wad of notes from a pocket in his rucksack, he was at once absorbed in his problem.

I called again to the priest.

He did not answer. There was something odd about the way he was lying. I looked again and saw that the snow by his head was crimson.

As I ran down the slope to him, the firing started up again and bullets stung the snow all round me. I dropped

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into the dip and slithered up beside him. He was dead, with a bullet through his head. He must have been climbing out of the dip when he was hit, for his body was slightly above it and his right elbow plunged deep into the snow as if he had been caught in the act of raising himself. There was nothing I could do for him now.

Picking up his binoculars, I took a chance and made a dash up the slope again. How the bullets sang! And Helpmann, good fellow, with his notes stuffed into his mouth, reached down his great arms and hauled me the last few feet to safety.

The firing stopped at once.

During the dreadful silence that followed, we sat there behind the rock too dazed and apathetic to do anything. Not a sound from Emil and his mother, though I knew they could not have missed what had happened. Then the baby started to wail, her thin, puny voice frail and feeble after the thunder of the firing.

I don't know how long we sat there like that.

Helpmann was the first to speak. "This was the only priest I ever liked. Nothing soft about him. He was a man." I had never before seen Helpmann upset.

Some minutes later, "Well, Peter," he said. "We cannot remain here for ever. We must — how do you say? — face the music — alone now."

He took the glasses from my hand and, dropping on to his stomach, slid along to the edge of the rock.

"For God's sake, be careful," I said. "We can't afford to lose you, too."

When I thought he had gone far enough, I sat on his feet. He raised the glasses to his eyes and focused them on the soldiers.

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"Don't worry, Peter. They do not even look this way." Pause. "They argue about something." Another pause. "Let me have a bit more rope. It's quite safe."

I allowed him another foot or two and waited tensely. Then he slid back again.

"What's on your mind?" I asked

"I tell you in a moment," he said, and, standing upright behind the rock, he looked first towards the Devil's Kitchen, then to where the soldiers were. He seemed to be measuring up the distance.

"Ah, I thought so," he said in his slow, deliberate way. "In a hundred or at most a hundred and fifty yards we shall be out of range. The whole tower of the Sentinel will be between us and them. The priest was right—there's a sheer drop below them and they cannot go any further. If they want to chase us, they must drop down and cross the snowfield."

"Maybe. But the moment we leave this cover they'll pick us off one by one. We haven't a hope of making that hundred and fifty, not a great caravan like ours."

"Then we must get them down on to the snowfield. I know how to do it."

He told me his plan. I thought it was very risky and said it would probably cost him his life.

"Rubbish, Peter. I have the nine lives of a cat, a *black* cat, too. I draw them all right, you see. It is me they chase. You — they do not care two farthings for you."

I tried to dissuade him.

"What is the alternative?" he said. "We lose our guide. There is little food left, no fuel in the primus. That baby will not stand a night in the open. If we do not reach the pass well before dark, it is the end, *finis*. Now, Peter my

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friend, take my overcoat — and my rucksack — and these glasses. I must travel lightly. It is a long time since I sprint the hundred yards. Now look at me — am I not the Olympic athlete from toe to head?"

I couldn't help smiling. An Olympic athlete? He looked more like a steam-roller.

Once again he measured up the distance he was going to run. "Poor old priest," he said. "He was a good fellow. We owe him everything."

Away he went — right along the fringe of rocks, dodging a boulder here, jumping a stretch of snow there, scrambling and falling and whirling and sprawling. A fantastic sight.

He must have covered a third of the distance when the soldiers woke up to what was happening and resumed their firing. He dropped face down in the snow and lay still. I was worried stiff — till he bounded up again, hauled himself over a rock and down on the far side. I lost sight of him now, but the continued firing told me he was still within range, and not yet hit. What a din! It sounded as if all the mountains were bent on destroying him.

Then suddenly the firing ceased. Had he been hit or was he out of range now?

Again the dragging, uneasy silence.

I tried to focus my glasses on the soldiers, but the place where they had been was empty. Following the ridge down, I saw two heads — three heads — bobbing in and out of sight behind the rocks, finally vanishing altogether. I did not need to be told that they were making for the snowfield, that they were going to give chase.

Standing on top of the toad rock, I saw Helpmann

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plodding slowly through the snow towards the pass. When I called, he stopped and waved to me to follow, shouting something I failed to hear.

Was it safe for us to leave cover and follow so soon? The answer depended on how long the soldiers would need to turn the corner of the snowfield, and only the priest would have known that.

Still hesitating, I picked up Helpmann's gear and walked back to the rocks where Madame Mendl and Emil were still hiding. When I saw the state Madame Mendl was in, I did not hesitate any more.

"We're going on right now," I told her. "I think you'd do best to give Emil the baby —" the poor mite was howling — "she'll settle down once we're on the march."

Madame Mendl was dazed. I had a job to make her understand me.

"This is our chance now. We mustn't miss it." I spoke as gently as I could. "You know about the priest?"

"Can't you see that's what upset her?" Emil snapped. "If you had let me bring my rifle, it would never have happened."

I helped Madame Mendl to her feet. I ought to have known better than to interfere with Emil's arrangements for carrying the baby. He turned on me with angry eyes, like a wild animal guarding its young, and would not let me lift a finger to settle her.

I led the way and purposely avoided passing the priest's body. But Madame Mendl went straight to it. She knelt by the crimson halo of snow where the pale head lay and gazed with horror and tenderness on it. Then, cupping

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her hands, she scooped up the white snow till the head was covered.

I was glad that Emil had gone on ahead.

The sun was blazing hot now, beating down fiercely upon us and melting the snow into slush. We found it easier to plod along the slush than to dodge among the rocks.

As we went, Madame Mendl talked about the priest; of his courage, his liveliness and his kindness ("when Emil broke his leg, he came every afternoon for a month to read to him"); of the sermons on soap-boxes; of his odd clothes, the flying robe, and the dirty clogs. She rambled on till she was interrupted by a low rumble from a gulley high up on the Sentinel. Shading our eyes to look up, we saw a cascade of snow and loose stones hurtle over a thousand foot precipice. It was followed by a shout.

I looked back to see where the shout came from. Three tiny figures were on the snowfield. The fall, though well to the north of them, had evidently given them a fright, for they were moving very rapidly towards us. With the help of the glasses, I saw that de Kretser was in front and that he was almost running. If they kept up that rate, they would be upon us before we reached the pass.

I could see that Emil had joined Helpmann now, and they both slackened their pace for Madame Mendl and me to catch them up. We moved distressingly slowly while all the time de Kretser was gaining on us.

They were almost to the edge of the snowfield now; a hundred yards or so would take them past the danger point. Madame Mendl kept urging me to go ahead, but of course I could not do that.

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It was the mountain that came to our rescue. Suddenly the Sentinel let loose all its fury in one tremendous earth-shaking bellow of thunder. The great gulley, down which we had seen the first avalanche pour, swelled with white cloud, bellying out like the sail of some gigantic argosy. For an instant I saw the three figures against the snowfield, tiny as flies on a ceiling, terrified into immobility. The next moment they were obliterated. Behind the turmoil of roaring cloud, the snow and stones and ice were sweeping them away.

We never saw them again. When at last the cloud had subsided, there below us was the bare white expanse of snowfield, the same as it had been a few minutes before, except that it was a little rougher and that de Kretser and the two soldiers had vanished. A puff or two of silvery powder hovered ghostlike above their graves.

So that was the end of de Kretser. After days and days of bitter struggle, the mountain had snuffed him out at a single blow. I suppose we ought to have felt on top of the world, to have shouted for joy, for the frontier pass was ours now and our troubles almost over. But the loss of the priest depressed our spirits. We plodded on slowly and in silence — even Emil was quiet.

In the late afternoon we reached the frontier and passed from the bright sunlight into the chill gloom of the Devil's Kitchen. Almost at once the path began to descend steeply. There was practically no snow, for the walls of the pass — or gorge, as it really was — were so tall and close together that they almost met. All we had to remind us that it was still daytime was a thin, crooked slit of blue sky. We had eaten our last bite of food long since. We were hungry and worn out with the strain and

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struggle of the last few days. The baby almost choked herself with crying. How melancholy was the echo in that dismal place!

At last we emerged from the darkness on to the far side, into one of the loveliest sunsets I have ever seen. It calmed our tired spirits and gave us hope again. Below us were spread the foothills of Tellyria, range upon range of them drenched in the soft golden glow of evening. While we rested and refreshed ourselves with the sight, Madame Mendl lifted Maria from the rucksack and nursed her and sang gently to her till she was quiet and fell asleep.

"We're in Tellyria! Nothing can hurt us now, mother," said Emil. "Look, there's a mountain hut down there, not very far. And oh, there's smoke coming out of the chimney!"

"That means warmth and rest and food to eat," said his mother, her eyes lighting up. "You must be terribly hungry, dear."

"And cocoa too," said Helpmann, producing a fistful of cocoa beans from his pocket. "All this time I keep them a secret. I make for you all a mag-nee-ficent brew — to celebrate. Ach, the cat's wheeskers!"



CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

THAT was five years ago. Within a week Helpmann and I were flown back home and within a fortnight both he and I were in Cambridge again, directing the evolution of yet another modification to the Radar-beam camera. Helpmann's genius proved the basis of the revised standard model which eventually saved thousands of airmen's lives in the final air offensive of the war. The perfecting of the Blocking Beam — that, too, was his achievement.

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Helpmann is in a quiet way a national figure, a research scientist of first-class importance. Perhaps the man in the street does not know his name, for he hates the limelight, but few people are unfamiliar with the effects of his work. His achievement has been recognized by the award of a high decoration. The authorities have also been misguided enough to waste another decoration — a smaller one, of course — on me.

Nothing in my life has equalled the excitement of those few weeks in Silvania. On considering the whole episode, we seem to have come through by a series of remarkable pieces of luck. What if our grape wagon had been properly examined? If Helpmann had been hit on the railway bridge? If the avalanche had fallen a few minutes later? Or if the autogyro had returned to plague us on the last afternoon, as well it might have done? At the time I never thought of that danger, and it wasn't till months later that I learnt that, when she landed at Kolenso, Rudolf had put the rotor blades out of action.

And yet perhaps all achievement consists in a series of lucky successes. When next the opportunity offers to pit cunning and strength against men or nature or circumstance, I shall not cringe as I did before Maclaren. I shall take the chance with open hands and see if my luck holds. Our adventures only just avoided tragedy. The Mendl family survived intact by the narrowest of chances. Soon after we left Tellyria I received this letter from Madame Mendl:

Dear Mr. Howarth,

It is odd to be living in a city. But my sister is so kind and this is our home now till the cruel war

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is ended. Maria thrives and has gained nearly half a pound. Emil frets to join the fighting and threatens to run away with the soldiers — they are everywhere now and must soon be in action against the enemy. But he does not really mean to go. He is a good boy and takes the place of father and helps me in every way — a grown up boy now! He will not leave me.

I think often of Josef and our lovely home and the grape harvest we never had. I try not to feel bitter. And I know that above all we must never lose heart. One day we shall go home again and Josef will rebuild the old house. We shall welcome you back, for I think often of you too, my good friend. We suffered indeed, but you returned to help us, and I have learnt that kindness makes up for suffering.

And now I must prepare Maria's bath!

She ends by thanking us for our help — as if we needed or deserved to be thanked after having brought her family so close to disaster! She is a loyal and a courageous woman. It is remarkable that she never became bitter, as so many would have done.

As for Josef, he was taken to a northern port and made to work in the docks, loading cargo boats. He had no more freedom than a prisoner of war, and had to work long hours on poor food. How he must have loathed it! The letters he wrote to his wife never reached her. Two months after the end of the war he was sent back to Sylvania, where he set about rebuilding his home at once. He found it a shell, the inside a charred ruin, piled with

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rubble, overgrown with weeds. But the stone walls were sound and only needed patching up. It was the inside that took the time. And the vines, too! The neighbours had done what they could during his absence, but there were too many for them to manage properly.

Last autumn they invited me over for the grape harvest. It was fun to see the grape wagon again, the one Helpmann and I had hidden in — but full of grapes this time. They made me climb the ladder and peep inside at the pulped and squelching mass of grapes. They tried to push me in when I wasn't looking, but I dodged just in time. What a festival it was, with music and games and feasting — and in the evening a procession of children through the wood, all carrying coloured lanterns. Maria was in that procession, a sturdy, rather solemn five-year old with two dark pigtales. Of course she remembers nothing of her mountain adventure. Her mother often talks of it and says that till the end of the world Maria will hold the record for being the youngest to cross the Devil's Kitchen.

On the day following the festival I climbed with Josef to the Devil's Kitchen — or rather, to the spot where the priest was killed. I wanted to see the monument which the people of the valley have erected to his memory. It is a handsome granite cross set in a cairn of loose stones. On a slab at the base his name is inscribed, and below it three words:

DEUS — PATRIA — FAMILIA

Emil is nineteen now and in the Silvanian army, where he means to stay till he is made a Field-Marshal. I've not seen him since he was a boy, for he was away on a

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training course when I returned for the harvest festival. They tell me he's still the wild and independent lad he always was, but affectionate as well and devoted to little Maria. Not since his father was taken prisoner has he shown a trace of jealousy of her. He likes his home more than he ever did before and always spends his leaves there. People still talk of him (though not in his hearing) as the lad who carried Maria safely over the pass. Perhaps he will get leave and guide the cosmic-ray research team that I am taking to the Silvanian Alps next summer. Whatever happens, nothing can equal the climb we did together over the Devil's Kitchen with the Yugo-Latian Army at our heels.